

THE DARK CHRONICLES

Prologue: Prophecy

It was a windy night and pelting rain prickled against the skin, driving most people to seek the comforts of their fireplaces. In the pub of the Hog's Head in Hogsmeade, though, the fire burned low and cold, casting a chill over the atmosphere of the room. Behind the bar, the barman was continuously polishing glasses with a grimy rag, getting them steadily dirtier and dirtier. His beady eyes roved around the room, taking in the sparse customers and lingering particularly on one woman who sat alone on one of the rickety wooden tables.

The said woman was mumbling to herself. Weighted down by an ungodly number of shawls, her arms literally covered in bangles and huge glasses making her eyes appear much larger than they were, she looked distinctively out of place in the darkness and dirt of the pub. She was nursing a glass of firewhiskey that she seemed to be downing steadily with no effort at all. Abruptly, she pushed the empty glass away from her and with as much dignity as a drunken person could muster she stood up.

It was at that exact moment that her face turned suddenly blank and she stood stock-still. Another man, hooded and cloaked, who sat in the corner, saw this and swiftly walked over to where the woman was. Whispering in her ear, he led her into one of the more private parlors in the Hog's Head. The woman did not put up a fight. Instead, she seemed to start shaking, like someone exposed to too much cold.

The man shut the door behind them at the same time as the woman started to speak. With her head thrown back and her eyes rolling to the back of her head, she spoke in harsh tones,

"The One with the power immeasurable approaches

Born as the Seventh Month wanes

Born of the blood of light and dark – "

At this point, the man noticed a presence behind the doors. He set his lips in a grim line and murmured the spell that sealed off the door and all other entranceways to within the room. Then he returned his attention back to the woman.

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Severus Snape cursed the high heavens at the door that was sealed smartly in front of his face. He had just thrown every opening charm and jinx he knew on the door and it would not budge an inch. He had even added a few curses although, Snape thought with a sardonic smile, he doubted whether Crucio would actually open the charm the man had placed on the door.

Of all the times for Sibyll Trelawney to launch a real prophecy, she had to pick now, when not only was Dumbledore not in Hogwarts but he wasn't in England. And of all the people who had to come, the man had just conveniently happened to be sitting there. Snape paused thoughtfully and gave one last speculative glance at the door.

"All right you win," he grumbled, feeling disgusted with himself. The first part of the prophecy would have to do. He was sure Dumbledore would find a way to know the rest of the prophecy anyway.

With a swish of his cloak, he was outside the Hog's Head getting pelted by the rain. Without a pause, he began striding towards the castle. Much as he loathed most of the people in the Order of the Phoenix, they had to know just what had transpired.

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The man stood facing the woman as she rasped out the last part of the prophecy,

"Born by good to grow in darkness

And he shall know the magic that none knows

And by his chosen path

Shall the future of all be decided

The One of immeasurable power

Approaches as the Seventh Month dies..."

The woman then slumped onto the chair behind her. A second later, she groaned and raised her head.

The first thing Sibyll Trelawney noticed when she regained consciousness was the dark figure of a cloaked man in front of her. Her eyes widened and words rose up to her mouth but before she could say anything, the man walked out of the private parlor with nary a word to her or a backward glance at her direction.

"Wait!" Sibyll Trelawney shrieked out as she ran after paused outside the door.

"Yes?"

For a moment, Sibyll felt confused. She was going to ask him something... What...? "I, er, well... I was supposed to meet Headmaster Dumbledore here!" she finally spoke out in what she hoped was a semblance of her usual misty tone.

The man regarded her with amusement. "The Headmaster is not at Hogwarts," was all he said before inclining his head to her and striding out of the pub.

Leaving behind a very confused Sibyll Trelawney wondering what on earth had just happened.

3 days later...

"I see," Professor Dumbledore twiddled with his fingers behind his desk as he looked at Severus Snape from behind half moon glasses. "So all that you heard, Severus, was merely that part of the prophecy and nothing else."

"Yes," Snape growled. "Whoever it was, he sealed off the room before I could hear any more. Damn effective seal it was, too. I tried everything I could think of to remove it but it wouldn't come off."

"And you don't know who that man was?"

"It didn't seem like anyone I knew," Snape confessed. "He was dressed in a dark cloak from head to toe, though."

"Could he have been one of Voldemort's?" Albus wondered.

Snape shook his head. "The moment I got back to the Dark Lord, he questioned me about the so-called prophecy I'd heard. Word travels fast. Apparently, the barman of the Hog's Head is one of the Dark Lord's spies. But the man with Trelawney? I doubt it since the Dark Lord himself has no knowledge of the prophecy apart from what I told him."

Dumbledore's eyes glinted at this. "So Voldemort knows, does he?"

A pause. "I'm sorry, Albus. You'll just have to protect whoever is due to give birth by the end of July."

"Hmmm..."

Snape crossed his hands and waited for Dumbledore to speak again. The other wizard was currently very deep in thought. After a while he spoke again,

"You do know the Eveleighs and the Longbottoms are expecting children roughly around the end of July?" Dumbledore revealed in an offhand manner. "They will have to be informed."

Snape nodded. Dumbledore's expression then turned amused. "Oh, and I forgot to add. Lily and James Potter are expecting a child to arrive at around that time, too."

A muscle twitched near Snape's jaw but other than that, his expression remained unreadable.

Dumbledore smiled. "Very well, Severus. You may go."

Snape muttered a farewell to Dumbledore before sweeping spectacularly out of the room. As he strode along the corridors of Hogwarts, his dark robes billowing around him, he fervently wished the prophecy child was anyone but the Potters'.

TBC

Note: So how was it? I would just like to say though that Snape here is already a spy to the Dark Lord by Dumbledore... Just so long as we can clear up some confusion. And the Eveleighs are my own characters.

Chapter One: Child of Darkness, Child of Light

“Aaaaaahhhhhhhh!”

Sirius Black watched his best friend’s expression grow ghostly pale as he listened to his wife screaming. It had been over twelve hours and Lily had not come out of labor yet. James was a nervous wreck and Sirius didn’t know whether to laugh at him or try to do something to comfort him. He finally decided on the latter, giving James what he hoped was an encouraging pat. James just gave him a wild-eyed stare.

Remus came in and cast a glance at James. He raised a brow at Sirius who shrugged.

“Miranda Eveleigh and Alice Longbottom are still in labor, too,” Lupin reported. “Dumbledore’s with the Longbottoms right now. He’ll be here shortly.”

The three of them turned to the closed door behind where Lily was. The noise had stopped and it was eerily silent. The door opened and the medi-witch who had assisted with Lily’s pregnancy came out beaming. In her hands was a small, red baby wrapped in white blankets and whimpering.

“Congratulations, sir,” she whispered. “You have a son.”

For a moment, James was shocked speechless then he let out a whoop of delight as he rushed to the boy – his son. The very son who, if the prophecy was right, could most probably be the one to contain a power great enough to save them from Voldemort. He gingerly took the boy from the medi-witch and with a huge smile, entered the room where Lily was resting.

Remus and Sirius followed, both grinning at each other.

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Dumbledore and Molly Weasley looked up as James entered, flanked by Remus and Sirius who were taking turns cooing at the baby James was holding proudly in his arms.

“Headmaster, I’d like you to meet Harry James Potter, the newest addition to our family,” James declared in a voice full of pride.

“Yeah, little bugger looks a lot like you, Prongs,” Sirius observed balefully. “He’ll most likely be the downfall of the wizarding world rather than it’s savior.”

“Sirius Black!” Molly gasped, scandalized.

“It’s quite alright, Molly,” Dumbledore smiled as he approached little Harry James. “He has Lily’s eyes, doesn’t he?”

James nodded, his own hazel ones sparkling. “How is Lily?” the Headmaster asked, concern in his voice.

“She’s fine, sir. She’s asleep right now. It took a lot out of her.”

The Headmaster nodded. “As expected. Well, it looks like she gave birth first. Miranda and Alice are still in labor.”

“Sir... does this mean that Harry is, well, the prophecy child?” James inquired eagerly.

Dumbledore looked at him and sighed. “Oh no, Mr. Potter. Just because Harry was born first does not necessarily mean that he is the prophecy child. We will have to see which one among the three born today is the real prophecy child.”

James smirked. “There’s no need to see, sir. Obviously, it will be Harry.”

Sirius nodded vigorously with his best friend as Remus sighed. Dumbledore frowned. “I suggest you not get too confident. There is a rather large – “

But Dumbledore was cut off by a loud wail. Harry was bawling but it was no ordinary cry. It seemed as if the babe was in great pain. Molly Weasley was the first one to regain her senses.

“I’ll get the medi-witch,” she said sharply as she exited the room.

No sooner had she left before Harry’s crying went a notch up and strange things began to happen. The lights kept flicking on and off. The windows were banging together and the furniture shuddered and suddenly started levitating.

Remus, Sirius and James’ eyes went suddenly wide while Dumbledore’s narrowed. The Headmaster knew the other three could feel it. The dense, dark air of evil that had suddenly coated the room. Dumbledore’s heart constricted painfully. No. This could not be happening. This night was supposed to be a celebration of the birth of the person who would defeat Voldemort. He had never felt magic this dark before. Not even Voldemort possessed it. He hesitated. This couldn’t be what the prophecy meant could it?

“Headmaster, what’s happening?” Sirius cried out as a wind picked up in the room, blowing everything haphazardly.

Remus and James though were staring at Harry, their mouths slightly open. Dumbledore turned to look and saw that the baby’s bright green eyes had turned into a deep, dark black. It was obvious where the chaos was emanating from. Fear pulsed from all the people in the room.

James felt despair interlaced with the fear. This creature could not – was not – his son! He shut his eyes as he wished he could just drop it on the floor.

“Ut vos erant”, Dumbledore intoned with a swish of his wand.

Nothing happened. Frowning, he said another incantation. “Reverto ut Northmanni.”

Still nothing.

Panic began to rise in the room as Sirius, James and Remus saw that not even the headmaster could stop it.

“It’s Harry! It’s all coming from Harry!” Remus roared. “Stop him! Headmaster, do something!”

Dumbledore’s face paled for a moment. He did not want to do this spell. Not here and not now and, gods, not to a defenseless baby. But he shuddered to think of what might happen if he didn’t. The Headmaster braced himself until –

The darkness vanished.

Just like that. Now, in astonishment, the four men in the room looked around. Harry had fallen silent and a calm, white light illuminated the room. The wind stopped and the levitating objects gently returned to their original positions. The utter destruction that had befallen the room moments ago disappeared without a trace. Dumbledore and James exchanged shaken looks.

What was going on?

“Headmaster?” the shaky voice was Molly Weasley’s.

She stood near the open door, holding a white bundle in her arms. Beside her were a medi-witch and Severus Snape, all three of them looking absolutely shocked.

“H-headmaster...” Molly stuttered.

Even Snape took a moment before he could regain his voice. “I-it stopped. Everything,” the usually unflappable potions master gestured weakly around in shock. “All the flying objects and banging windows stopped when we brought him in here.”

Dumbledore sharply inhaled a breath of air. With quick strides he made his way to Molly who was still holding the baby.

“His name’s Francis Eveleigh, Professor,” Molly whispered as the young babe opened his blue eyes and gurgled at them.

The sound mingled with the sweet serenity that had suddenly engulfed the entire room.

Dumbledore smiled, the twinkle returning to his eyes. Surely... this had to be the prophecy child.

Meanwhile, Harry lay forgotten in his father's arms. No one noticed the white glow that had emanated from him – like the dark one – begin to subside. Everyone was crowding around Francis. The proclaimed prophecy child.

A week later...

"So you mean Francis Eveleigh is the prophecy child?" James questioned quietly. "And not..." Harry. He left his son's name unspoken.

Dumbledore looked worriedly at James and Lily's crushed expressions. They had held out so much hope that their son would be the one to be born with the power and would save the Wizarding World. It hurt Albus to see their pride trodden on. 'But', Albus thought. 'I did warn them... not to expect too much.'

"Yes I am certain Francis is the prophecy child. After all, you saw what happened to Harry that night. Why if it hadn't been for Francis..." Dumbledore didn't need to finish his sentence. James' dark countenance was enough.

His heart went out to the Potters. They had wanted a savior... a normal boy in the very least. But what they got was... A freak! Lily had sobbed when James had told her what happened the night Harry was born. Dumbledore sighed.

"How are you feeling, Lily?"

Lily gave a wan smile. "Much better, headmaster. I've rested enough now."

Dumbledore nodded. "And how is... Harry?"

He saw James and Lily exchange a look. "He won't stop crying," James said softly. "And every time he cries the same thing happens. Everything in the room starts going haywire. The furniture flies around and slams itself into walls and the air is so thick and dank it feels like it's choking you..."

Lily let out a dry sob. "Headmaster, please! What can we do? There has to be something we can do to make this all stop! I can't take it anymore!"

Albus kept silent. He had been thinking about the whole situation with Harry, too. "Lily, James, listen to me. I have a friend who I believe can help with Harry's... strange behavior. He has never worked with a baby before but he is willing to try it when Harry turns two years old."

Lily and James listened with bated breaths as Dumbledore continued, "You have to allow him to do what he feels right to the boy, though."

"We don't really have a choice," Lily said softly. She looked up. "We'll do it."

And with that decision, Harry's parents sealed his fate.
Two years later

Lily and James stared at the man standing in front of them. Dumbledore's friend was a tall, thin, stern-looking man with glinting coal-black eyes. A wave of coldness seemed to emanate from him, but then again, that could have just been James' or Lily's imagination. The man eyed the child that held on tight to Lily's hand, fear mingled with curiosity in his bright green eyes.

"This is him?" the man asked in a clipped voice.

"Yes."

"Very well. I will be taking him. You may return in three hours."

Lily bent down to look at a suddenly scared-looking Harry in the eye. "Harry, I want you to do what this man says, all right? No matter what

it may be, you are to follow him. Do I make myself clear?" she asked in a stern tone.

Harry nodded, bobbing his chubby head up and down.

"Very well," Lily allowed the man to take one of Harry's hands and roughly pull the boy into the cold, dungeon room.

James and Lily remained as the door slammed shut.

"Dyou think we're doing the right thing, Lils?" James murmured.

Lily wavered slightly before answering. "Yes. Besides, now that Harry's gone even for a few hours... I feel somewhat lighter."

James nodded with his wife and they both left the place. If they had stayed ten minutes longer, they would have heard Harry's tortured screams echoing throughout the otherwise empty corridor.

But they didn't.

TBC

Note: In case you couldn't understand my writing, both the dark glow and bright glow came from Harry. It was just a coincidence that Francis came in when the bright glow emanated. So sorry dears. Needed it for the plot.

Oh, and this is my first fic. EVER. Be nice, please...

I know I'm not exactly Shakespeare when it comes to this kind of thing.

Chapter Two: The Forgotten

Another year or so later...

James and Lily pulled the hood of their cloaks closer over their heads. They were walking towards the Wizard Sanitarium, a dark bleak building where insane wizards who were deemed to be a hazard to society were kept. It was also somewhat a darker version of St. Mungo's. Holding a three and a half year old Harry by the hand, Lily was pulling him roughly inside the said place.

"But mommy!" Harry protested, dangerously close to tears. "I don't wanna go!"

Lily looked back at him, green eyes blazing from behind her hood. "Harry Potter! We have had this conversation many times! You are going to get your monthly treatment from Healer Wycksworth if it kills you! Are you forgetting that you lost control of that... thing again last week!"

Harry bowed his head in shame and wanting to appease his mother. He had not meant to do it. But the 'tingle', as he called it, had come again last week. And all the furniture of the Potter dining room in Godric's Hollow had been smashed to little bits. Harry hadn't meant for the 'tingle' to come. He hated the 'tingle'. Every time it came, it always caused chaos and Harry inevitably ended up being screamed at and spanked by his parents. He tried to control the 'tingle' but the more he tried controlling it, the more uncontrollable it became.

"I'm sorry, mommy," he whispered softly.

Lily coldly ignored him as she pulled him along the long corridors. People visiting their relatives occasionally paused to spare a glance at them, and James and Lily would draw their cloaks even more over their heads.

Finally, they stopped in front of Healer Wycksworth's dungeon room. Harry whimpered softly. He was shaking but not out of cold. Rather, it was out of fear. He knew what was coming as soon as he set forth inside Healer Wycksworth's rooms.

Pain.

It was one of his earliest memories. Of Healer Wycksworth muttering words under his breath and subjecting him to all sorts of things. Sometimes the Healer would cast a spell on him and it would be so painful, Harry would be spitting blood on the floor afterwards. Sometimes the Healer would brew all sorts of strange concoctions that burned, or gave you nightmares, or made you feel like your skin was melting off your body.

For Harry, it was pure agony. For his parents, it was a way to rid him of the 'tingle'. Which was why Harry never told his parents about the pain or what went on in therapy. If they bothered to ask – which was rarely – he gave a bright smile and said, "Fine!" Of course, it never was.

Lily was about to knock on the door when a woman with a head of brown curls stopped by near them.

"Oh, what a charming child!" she squealed pinching Harry's cheek. "What is he here for? What affliction is he suffering from? This is my Timothy and, well, as you can see, he's a little detached but I'm very optimistic about his therapy!"

Harry looked at Timothy, a boy his age who was drooling and whose eyes darted every which way now and then, and tried to squirm away.

"...Healer said it shouldn't take more than two months!" the woman prattled on. "But then again with Healers you never know... My husband Gamine, he wanted Timmy under intensive twenty four hour care but I said, Gamine, I am perfectly capable of caring for our own child! And so now here we are. We just go back here every week for Timmy's treatment. What is your son here for?"

James' expression turned to stone. "None of your business," he stated icily, causing the woman to back off. "Now if you don't mind, we have some business to attend to. And by the way, he's not our son."

"O – oh," the woman said as she walked swiftly away.

Harry's parents knocked on the door but Harry was in a state of shock. His father's words kept reverberating in his head. He's not our son... He's not our son... He's not our son...

Even after the afternoon's torture session with Healer Wycksworth, even after all his screams, his father's voice kept playing over and over inside his head, like a broken music box.

He was numb with disbelief, and through it all, his heart became just a little bit colder. He's not our son.

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"Daedarus?"

"Dumbledore."

The headmaster rose and extended a hand towards a chair behind his desk. His guest took it immediately and Albus sat down with him. He offered Daedarus Wycksworth a cup of tea which the healer took reluctantly.

"I just wanted to know how Harry's treatment has been going on," Dumbledore spoke pleasantly, one hand stroking his phoenix's feathers.

Healer Wycksworth snorted. "Albus, the boy is obviously full of dark magic. I have tried whatever technique I could, delving deep into ancient books to try and find a solution to it but I haven't come up with anything. Short of forcing the magic out of the boy by pain induction, I don't think I know what else to do."

Albus sighed. "Is it really so necessary?"

"Do you wish for his power to persist and someday take control of him?" Daedarus Wycksworth asked harshly. "We have one Dark Lord. We have no need of another. With powers like those, you should have disposed of the boy immediately."

"You know I couldn't do that," Dumbledore frowned. "Besides, he is still James and Lily's son."

Daedarus' expression grew, if possible, darker. "I suppose if he does grow dark then, I needn't say 'I told you so'."

Dumbledore chuckled wanly. "Yes, yes."

"So, how is your Golden Boy?" Daedarus roughly inquired.

"Francis, you mean? Wonderful, actually. I paid Miranda and Keelan a visit yesterday. Molly and Arthur Weasley were there, too, and they were all pampering Francis, as usual," Dumbledore smiled. "They spoil the child rather so."

The Healer's eyes gleamed for a second. "Keelan Eveleigh... Albus, are you sure you trust him?"

"Of course, Daedarus," Dumbeldore's voice had turned sharp. "I trust Keelan just as I trust you."

Daedarus Wycksworth leaned back, half his face covered in the shadows. "You trust too much."

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Elsewhere

"Issss everything ready, Death Eaters?"

The group of men shuddered at having their master so close. One of the few near the front replied,

"Yes, Master."

A wicked something akin to a smile flashed through the Dark Lord's face.

"Well let us not keep them waiting."

And with a flash of light, he vanished.

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Longbottom Residence

Harry huddled alone in a corner, consumed by the silence and the cold. His mommy and daddy had brought him to this house for the afternoon because they couldn't find a babysitter for him. Harry didn't know where it was, but he knew that there were lots of people here. His mother and father seemed to know them all. His Uncle Remus and Uncle Sirius were here too, but like his parents, his uncles would pretend he didn't exist, glossing over him. When people greeted Lily and James Potter, they usually gave Harry strange looks. And now his mommy had told him to 'go somewhere and play'.

Harry gave a sad sigh. Play with what? He had no friends. Or toys.

He looked around. The house was rather old but it had still retained its grandeur.

Pulling himself up, he decided to go around and explore. He always liked the pretending game. Pretending to be something. Like a valiant knight, or a prince off saving a princess, or a noble warrior defending good. Today, he was going to pretend to be an explorer.

He wandered around the rooms and winding corridors, examining the magical objects but never touching them. There were so many rooms in the house. Soon, Harry grew tired of exploring. He stopped in the middle of a hallway and noticed that near the end of it, there were double doors that seemed to lead into a large room.

Curious, Harry approached it. The doors were partially open so he peeped inside.

All the people he had seen a while ago were congregating inside. They were all talking to one another, smiling, laughing. Harry felt cold pierce through his body. As usual, he was the one left out.

He saw his parents with a large group of people near the center of the room. Their attention seemed to be focused on something. Harry craned his head for a better look.

A young boy about his age was standing in the center of the mass of people. The boy had chestnut brown hair and was grinning from ear to ear. From his position, the voices of the people around the boy wafted over to him.

“Well, well kiddo. I heard about the prank you pulled on your poor parents last week,” said his Uncle Sirius to the boy in a proud voice. “You’re only three and you could do something like that? I’ll be damned.”

“Sirius, no swearing!” another woman chided him with a smile. “You should not taint Francis here with your incapability to shut your mouth.”

The small boy giggled out loud. “I didn’t mean to do it, Uncle Sirius!”

“Well, you probably didn’t, but seeing as how powerful your magic is going to be, I suppose a few minor lapses in control can be taken into account,” Harry’s Uncle Remus spoke this time.

“Oh, yes. Imagine, being able to levitate objects at this age. Most impressive,” another man said.

“Your parents are so lucky to have someone like you Francis.”

“Here, boy,” this time it was Harry’s father who approached Francis, giving him a small, thin package. “It’s for you.” James winked. “Use it well.”

Harry watched as the small boy unwrapped the package. It was a mini-broomstick. Harry felt jealousy course his insides as the boy squealed in delight and threw his arms around Harry’s father. James laughed and ruffled the boy’s hair.

Harry felt a lump form in his throat. His father never did that to him...

“You’d make any father proud, Francis!” James Potter exclaimed. James’ words hit him like a twelve-ton slab of granite. Beside his father, Lily Potter nodded, smiling warmly.

Harry turned away from the scene, something bitter rising from his stomach and scalding his throat. Tears prickled at his eyes but didn't fall. A searing heat gathered in his heart and he choked out an empty sob, leaning against the wall for support. His body had suddenly felt incredibly weak.

His parents didn't want him... they wanted the boy named Francis as a son instead. This revelation shattered Harry. He didn't know how long he stood there until his grumbling stomach insisted for food.

Sniffing slightly, Harry stood up, his eyes still smarting with unshed tears. He didn't know where to find food in the house.

"Hello."

He whirled around. The boy had laughing blue eyes that regarded Harry with curiosity.

"I'm Francis Eveleigh. I've never seen you here. Who're you?" he asked in a childish voice.

"Harry Potter," Harry mumbled.

"Potter? I didn't know Unca James and Aunt Lily had a boy, too!" Francis' eyes lit up while Harry burned with shame and anger. "Hey, I know! Let's play!"

Harry paused. Play? With him? He didn't say anything but his stomach growled in response.

"Oh, are you hungry? We can go get some food if you want!" Francis cheerfully proposed.

Harry didn't know what to say. But his stomach was pressing him on rather painfully...

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Harry grinned as his mini-broomstick surpassed Francis'. He laughed out loud, an extremely rare occurrence, and turned back in time to see Francis' mini-broomstick hit a wayward bush and knocked the little boy off. Harry turned his broom sharply and returned to Francis.

"Are you okay?"

Francis laughed. "I'm fine, Harry."

Harry tentatively smiled at his new friend. He liked Francis, despite the fact that his parents obviously preferred Francis over him. Francis was nice. And he really treated Harry like a normal person instead of a freak.

Harry got off the broom and helped Francis up.

They both looked back towards the Longbottom house. "Maybe we should go back," Harry mumbled. "They might be looking for us."

Francis nodded and smiled impishly. "Race you!"

But before either of them could move, a wave of energy rushed over the entire house and suddenly, they both heard popping sounds around them.

Not long afterwards, the screaming began.

TBC

Pretty long, ne? I have no qualms in saying I had a teensy bit difficulty in writing this chapter. Got distracted a lot. Harry will meet Voldie in the next chappie. Finally.

Chapter Three: Destiny Begins

The Dark Lord considered himself a winner. Even in his days as a student in Hogwarts, Voldemort always bested everybody else – came out on top because he believed that was who he was destined to be. A winner and nothing less. He had an instinct for victory. And on this cold, windy day as he and his Death Eaters poised for an attack on a gathering of the Order of the Phoenix, he could taste the sweetness of victory in the air even before the battle began.

Their objective today was simple: to kill the prophecy child and take out as many Order members as they could. Voldemort smiled wickedly. Triumph, a slightly different, promising triumph, hung palpable in the air. Perhaps his Death Eaters felt it too. They seemed more eager than usual.

He turned to the wizard on his right. The wizard was being controlled by the Imperius Curse but he was one of the most powerful wizards in the entire Wizarding World. It had been a stroke of genius to capture him. Voldemort bent the wizard's will, felt him resist at first but then the resistance melted away. Begin, the Dark Lord whispered into his mind.

And like an automaton, the wizard raised his wand. "Dissolvere Scutum." The wards around the Longbottom residence disintegrated.

Another spell followed. "Expellere Fascinatio." All other enchantments guarding the house crumbled.

And finally. "Sinere Aditus." The Anti-Apparition Enchantments fell.

And the attack began.

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"Keelan have you seen Francis?" Miranda Eveleigh asked her husband as they linked their arms and approached Dumbledore.

"Well, last I saw the little tyke he was with James and Lily," Keelan Eveleigh replied. "Don't worry too much about him, Mira. He'll be just

fine. He's probably off on another one of his games or playing somewhere."

Miranda sighed. "It's just that... in these dark times, so much hope is resting on Francis. I can't help but worry about him often."

Keelan laughed softly. "Relax, dearest. He's an Eveleigh. He'll be alright."

Miranda smiled at her husband, reassured. The tender moment was broken, though, when the door to the ballroom of the Longbottom house was thrown unceremoniously open and a man covered in blood staggered in. Someone screamed and a wine glass shattered to the floor. Silence reigned as every head turned to look at the person. It was Mundungus Fletcher.

"Dark Lord..." he wheezed. "Attack!"

It was then that everyone felt the Anti-Apparition Enchantments fall and felt the Death Eaters start to apparate.

"Everyone! Prepare yourselves!" Dumbledore roared.

The initial air of panic suddenly became replaced with determination. The Order of the Phoenix had not anticipated this, but they had planned for such scenarios just in case they would occur. But these were not plans drawn out in paper now. This was real life. Dumbledore turned to Keelan and Miranda.

"Find Francis and Portkey out of here," he instructed. "Remember that his life is of great importance!" Keelan nodded, supporting a pale-looking Miranda.

"We'll go with them, Dumbledore," James Potter with Lily beside him volunteered.

Dumbledore nodded. "Mr. Black and Mr. Sinclair? May I impose upon you both to offer your services too?"

Sirius scowled and shot one last spell at a Death Eater he was dueling, “Expugno!” before following Keelan, Miranda, James, Lily and Lewis Sinclair out the door.

Dumbledore turned and saw that the windows overlooking the front gardens had been blasted and from the rubble and debris, Lord Voldemort was making his way into the ballroom. His Death Eaters were already swarming around the house and jets of light flashed around, many of them Unforgivables. This mission had to be important for Voldemort to come attacking an Order of the Phoenix hideout himself. And it also meant that Voldemort had a spy in the Order. Dumbledore hardened his features. This was not good.

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The Dark Lord looked around the ballroom of the Longbottom residence. Many of his Death Eaters were engaged in battles with the halfwits who called themselves the Order of the Phoenix. Voldemort’s Inner Circle surrounded him as he regally made his way inside. His eyes swept the room, pausing for a moment on a Dumbledore with blazing blue eyes, before continuing to rove.

He let out something of an annoyed sigh. “He is not here,” the Dark Lord hissed. “Lestrangle, Malfoy, Nott, Avery, keep Dumbledore busy. Crouch, Parkinson, Macnair, Zephyn, come with me. The rest of you span the house to make sure the brat is not there. Take out as many members of the Order of the Phoenix as you can.”

His Death Eaters fanned out to carry out his orders. He smiled wickedly. “Time for a bit more spice. Bring in the dementors.”

As the dementors soared into the ballroom, and his other Death Eaters engaged Dumbledore in combat, Voldemort swept across the room to search the entire Longbottom residence from top to bottom with one goal firmly seared into his head: find and kill Francis Eveleigh.

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When the two boys heard the screaming start, they were frozen into place. Francis because he knew the sounds of horror could mean nothing good, Harry because it reminded him too much of his own screams in the hands of Healer Wycksworth. It was Francis who was knocked out of his stupor first.

“Something’s happening!” the young boy cried and made to run into the house but Harry’s hand shot out to stop him.

“Don’t! If something’s happening, it can’t be good to run in there!” Harry protested. He didn’t really know why but instinct told him that running towards the source of screams was not exactly the best idea.

He half dragged a distraught Francis over to some thick bushes. “Let’s hide here,” Harry whispered. “There’re lots of adults in there. They can take care of it.”

That statement seemed to give Francis some heart because as he and Harry positioned themselves in the middle of the thick bushes, he whispered, “My mommy and daddy are there, too! If there’s anyone who can stop anything bad going on, my daddy can do it!”

Harry nodded too as memories of his afternoons of torture flashed through his mind. But he cleared them away with a shake of his head. Shivering slightly from fear, he and Francis sat back in the bushes, doing their best not to move. They both saw the back doors leading out to the garden blast open. Both boys shielded their eyes instinctively from the dust and debris.

When they could look again, they saw a wizard on the ground and a black robed figure with a white mask standing over him, pointing his wand at him. The black figure cast a spell and with a jet of green light, the wizard on the ground lay still. The black robed figure then hurried back into the house.

Both Harry and Francis were speechless. Their eyes were wide with horror and still trained on the prone figure of the wizard on the ground who was not ever getting up again. Both boys tried to speak but neither could. Their haunted eyes met each other and a small whimper came from Francis.

Death had come along early to rob them of their innocence.

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“Francis!” Miranda screamed as she checked yet another bedroom. There seemed to be countless guest bedrooms in the Longbottom residence and not a Francis Eveleigh in any one of them. She shut the door.

“He’s not there! Keelan, he’s not there! Where is he?” she was half hysterical.

A white-faced Keelan Eveleigh pulled her close. “We’ll find him, Mira,” he murmured grimly. “I won’t let the Dark Lord take him.”

James and Sirius came running from the left corridor and Lily and Lewis came from the right. All four shook their heads, indicating that Francis was not in any of those places.

“We have to find him soon,” Sirius growled. “Voldemort’s little minions are all over the place. Merlin, who knew there were so many of them!”

Lily closed her eyes for a second as she recalled a half-forgotten memory of studying for OWLs at Hogwarts. “I think I may know how to find him.”

Everyone turned expectantly to her. “Do you have any possessions of Francis’ with you?” she asked. Miranda felt in her pockets and produced the magical yoyo Francis had been playing with earlier.

Lily nodded and proceeded to cast the spell, “Invenio.”

A ball of green fire shot from her wand. It floated over to the magical yoyo and engulfed the toy in the ball of flame. Then it dropped the yoyo and sped away from the corridor.

“Follow it,” Lily instructed and they ran after the flame.

James grinned at his wife. "Great work, Lils." Lily didn't reply but merely smiled. She had always been good in Charms.

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Voldemort opened his eyes, aware that he had been standing motionless for precisely five minutes. His Death Eaters had formed a circle around him, deftly cursing the Order wizards who surrounded them.

"Disicere," the Dark Lord murmured and the Order members around them were blasted into the wall. The Death Eaters turned to look at their master only to find that Voldemort was walking swiftly away. His Death Eaters hurriedly caught up with him.

They emerged into the wide gardens behind the Longbottom residence. A member of the Order of the Phoenix lay dead a few meters away. Voldemort's eyes were trained on some hydrangea bushes nearby.

Voldemort laughed. "He is here," he proclaimed to his Death Eaters.

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Harry felt cold run down his spine as the man in the center, the one with no mask over his frightening face, laughed. Beside him, he saw Francis gulp. They both stayed perfectly still, making sure that not even one leaf in the bush stirred. But the frightening man looked directly at them and both boys felt frozen in place. He pointed his wand at them and spoke a spell that they did not hear. A jet of blue light emanated from the wand and headed directly for them.

Harry and Francis tried to run but it was too late. The blue light suddenly became blinding.

When both boys could blink their eyes open, they felt paralyzed by what they saw. They were in the middle of a circle of Death Eaters and standing in front of them was the Dark Lord.

Voldemort laughed in a low voice. "See now, my faithful followers," he said silkily. "How we have the prophesied savior of the Wizarding World in our hands. The last hope of the Light is about to be extinguished."

Harry and Francis huddled together as Voldemort raised his wand.

At the very same moment Lily, James, Miranda, Keelan, Sirius and Lewis burst out into the gardens. They all paled when they saw Francis and Harry smack dab in the center of the Death Eaters and Voldemort with his wand raised.

"Avada Kedavra!" the sound of the curse reverberated in the air at the same time that someone else shouted another spell, "Deprecatio!"

It all seemed to happen in slow motion. The jet of green light from the Killing Curse was speeding towards Francis. Another jet of orange light shot from the wand of Lewis Sinclair and hit a horrified Harry Potter who was then lifted into the air. Just as the Killing Curse was about to hit Francis, Harry's body was levitated in front of Francis, right in the path of the green light. Harry's eyes only had time to widen before the green light hit him. The impact of the curse sent his body tumbling behind a group of birch trees.

"Harry!" Lily screamed but James restrained her.

Voldemort snarled but just as he was about to cast another curse on a paralyzed Francis, Dumbledore swept in.

He cast one look at the Death Eaters surrounding Francis and waved his wand, "Fragor."

Before Voldemort could conjure up a shield, golden white light filled the circle. He screamed in frustration as he raised his wand and banished the spell.

When the Dark Lord could look again, his Death Eaters were all on the ground. The Eveleigh child was gone and so were Dumbledore and his other Order minions. Voldemort growled, anger rising up within him.

“Crucio!”

His Death Eaters’ screams alleviated his anger but only somewhat. When he pulled off the Cruciatus, they all gingerly lifted themselves up and prostrated themselves around their Master.

“Dumbledore and his confounded Order may have gotten away this time,” Voldemort pronounced. “But they won’t be so lucky a second time around.”

He cast a disgusted look at his Death Eaters. “What are you worms waiting for! Search this house and see to it that no member of the Order of the Phoenix remains breathing within it!”

His Death Eaters all scrambled to do what he commanded. All but one.

“Master,” a voice said.

Voldemort turned and saw Crouch standing near the birch trees. His eyes narrowed. “Did you not hear what I have just said?”

“I heard Master but... you must come look at this.”

It was something in his Death Eater’s voice that made Voldemort approach him. Crouch indicated something with his hand. Voldemort turned to look and was shocked by what he saw. The other child, the one who had taken the Killing Curse instead of that cursed Francis Eveleigh, was encased in a floating violet bubble. The child was curled up in a fetal position and even from where he stood, Voldemort could feel the power emanating from the bubble. He racked his brains for a spell that would do this and came up empty.

Barty Crouch inspected the bubble closer. “He is alive, Master. Breathing, I think...”

Breathing? Impossible! Nobody had ever, nobody could ever survive the Killing Curse! Voldemort looked calculatingly at the violet bubble

and the child encased within it. Something was going on here and he wasn't exactly sure what it was.

And Voldemort hated not knowing.

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The moment they apparated into Godric's Hollow, Lily Potter rounded on Lewis Sinclair.

"What the bloody hell do you think you just did! That was Harry! Harry!" she cried out, tears prickling at her eyes. "That was my son that you just intentionally got killed!"

Lewis Sinclair met her accusations squarely but there was a haunted look in his eyes. "I had to do something! The Dark Lord was going to kill Francis! And you know how important he is to our cause! Francis must not die!"

"So what are you saying? That it's okay to let Harry die just so Francis can live!" Lily screamed at him.

The other man narrowed his eyes. "You're one to talk! You never cared about that child at all! And I seem to distinctly remember something you said about loathing his abnormality."

Lily was shocked into silence by that. Lewis Sinclair's eyes widened but before he could say anything else, James' fist collided with his jaw. He was knocked to the ground. James pulled his wife into an embrace and gently led her away, but not before casting a venomous look at the man on the ground. Silently, Sirius followed his best friend while Keelan helped Lewis up.

Lewis shrugged off the man's help and strode out of the room muttering angrily. Keelan sighed before going back to Miranda and Francis. It was the young boy who broke the silence first.

"Mom, dad?" his voice wavered. "What did that man do to Harry? Where is he? Can we play again?"

Miranda choked back a sob before replying, "Francis, dear. You can't play with Harry again. He's... gone."

TBC

We'll leave it at that. Done for now.

Chapter Four: The Boy Who Lived

Voldemort stood contemplatively over the violet bubble. He was back in the sprawling manor that was their headquarters. Using an extremely complicated spell, he had managed to transport the bubble-encased boy in here too. He just had no idea how to get the boy out of the bubble.

The Dark Lord paced alone in his room. He had neatly obliterated Barty Crouch the moment they got back. Instinct, something Voldemort was too smart to ignore, told him that there was something about this boy that had to be kept secret. For now.

Circling the bubble, Voldemort muttered a spell and cast it on the bubble. The violet thing only glowed before returning back to normal once more. Voldemort clenched his jaw. He had tried nearly every spell he could think of but nothing seemed to work. Of course the fact that he had no idea what the bubble was didn't help much at all.

The Dark Lord thought about something and then slowly, tentatively he brought one hand close to the surface of the violet bubble. The surface seemed to shimmer for an instant. With his face set, Voldemort then touched the violet bubble.

And he fell into a world of chaos and pain.

He was inside a large manor and he saw the boy inside the bubble crying as a man roundly spanked him hard for something.

...He was inside a dark dungeon room and he saw the boy cowering in front of an older man who pointed his wand at the boy and said, "Crucio."

...He saw the boy clutching his parents' hands and begging them not to be angry.

...He saw the boy locked up in his room, sent there with no dinner, clutching his stomach in pain.

...He was inside the Longbottom ballroom and saw the boy looking at Francis Eveleigh jealously.

...He was back in the same manor, decorated for Christmastime but the decorations were all lying in a wreck and the boy stood in the center of it all, looking guilty. A woman came in and he saw the horrified expression on her face before she rounded furiously at the boy.

Voldemort saw them and many more before he came to realize they were the child's memories.

With a great deal of effort, the Dark Lord wrenched his mind back into his physical body and snatched his hand away from the bubble. The moment he did so, the bubble disintegrated and the boy's unconscious body fell to the floor.

Voldemort was speechless. He sat down on an armchair and gathered his thoughts.

The boy was a son of one of the Light idiots, that much he was certain. But then why were all of his memories that miserable? And why had he been subjected to the Cruciatus curse? The Dark Lord tried not to think of the fact that the boy's past and his were so eerily similar in some aspects.

Voldemort's eyes strayed to the child's body that was still lying on the floor. He needed to know who this boy was. And incidentally enough, he recognized the man that the boy called father in his memories.

Voldemort snapped his fingers and with a pop, a house elf appeared before him. "Master?" the house elf quivered.

"Place this boy in one of the bedrooms in the west wing. Ensure that no one sees him," Voldemort instructed before striding out of the room.

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"M-Master? Y-you w-wished to s-see me?" a voice squeaked.

Voldemort rolled his eyes as he contemptuously regarded the person kneeling in fear before him. He could taste the fright that Peter Pettigrew emanated.

“Wormtail,” Voldemort spoke coldly. “There is something I wish to inquire of you.”

“O-of course, Master! Anything you wish! I have no secrets from you!” Wormtail answered hastily.

“I trust not. Tell me, Wormtail. Does that simpering Auror best friend of yours, James Potter, have a son?”

Wormtail was caught aback for a moment. This was not what he had expected. “Well, yes my lord. They do. His name is Harry.”

“Tell me about the child.”

Wormtail was confused but did as his Master ordered. “Not many know about the boy my lord. When he was born there was talk of him possessing dark magic. I have seen it twice when I was at the Potter’s but I did not know what to make of it. Some sort of... energy is let loose in the boy. It scares James and Lily so on Dumbledore’s suggestion, they took him to see a Healer in the Wizard Sanitarium,” Voldemort remembered the man who had cast the Cruciatus. “All I know is they barely pay attention to their son and most people do not even know they have a son.”

“And you saw fit to inform me of the boy’s strangeness only now?” the Dark Lord’s voice could get amazingly chilly.

“I-I did not think it was of importance, My Lord...” Wormtail faltered.

“Crucio.”

Voldemort walked out of the room amidst Wormtail’s screams.

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Harry blinked his eyes open. His body ached a lot and he groaned when he slowly sat up. What had happened? The last thing he remembered was a rushing green light and then pain. He frowned, trying to think back further. His eyes widened as it came to him. The frightening man had been aiming at Francis! Then all of a sudden... All of a sudden he had been levitated and it was him who had been hit instead of Francis! Harry's heart burned. They had used him to keep Francis safe!

"You are supposed to be dead," a cold voice uttered.

Harry spun around. It was only then that he took note of the fact that he was in a dimly lit spacious room and lying on a four-poster bed. A man, the one who had spoken, glided out of the shadows.

Harry gasped. "You!"

The man glared bemusedly down at him. "Me."

"Where are my parents?" Harry demanded.

Lord Voldemort raised a brow. "Would those be the same parents who willingly sacrificed you in order to save the Eveleigh child?"

Harry felt tears prickle at the back of his eyes as the man confirmed what he thought. "Th-they didn't... they wouldn't!"

"It seems like there is little they wouldn't do... including allowing you to be tortured by that Healer."

Harry didn't reply and when the Dark Lord looked at him he was slightly disturbed to see the boy on the verge of bawling. "I did not come here to talk to you of your idiot parents, though," the Dark Lord hastily put in. "How in Salazar's name did you survive that curse, boy?"

"Harry," the boy replied softly. "My name's Harry. And I don't know. It was probably the 'tingle'."

"The 'tingle'?"

"It happens to me sometimes. I don't know how and I don't know how to stop it. My mommy and daddy always punish me whenever I lose control of it... You won't tell them will you?" Harry looked up at him with pleading eyes that Voldemort felt disgusted.

"Boy, I have no plans of telling your parents anything. Much less that you are alive," he looked calculatingly at Harry. "They think you are dead, you know."

Harry opened his mouth to say something but then closed it again, looking broken. "They wouldn't miss me," he whispered. "They're probably glad I'm gone."

Voldemort, just for one millisecond, felt a twinge of empathy for the boy but then ruthlessly squashed it.

A moment later, the boy stared up at him. "I'm sorry, mister but I don't know your name yet."

"I am Lord Voldemort," he pronounced grandly.

Harry just scrunched up his face. "Sounds familiar... " he murmured.

Voldemort had the sudden urge to Crucio the boy. "Have you never heard of the Dark Lord?" he snarled.

Harry's eyes widened. "That's you! But you're evil! My parents said so!"

Voldemort laughed bitterly. "Good and evil, boy, are labels that the Light put in order to degrade those they cannot understand. There is no good and evil. There is only power."

Harry kept looking up at him, not comprehending. After a moment, he spoke again. "Where am I?"

"You are in the headquarters of the Dark Order," Voldemort informed him.

He sat down on an armchair near the bed, contemplating Harry in the darkness. Harry, who did not know what to make of the whole situation, remained quiet.

Voldemort broke the silence. "I have a deal for you, child," he murmured in such a low voice Harry barely caught it.

"W-what?"

"Stay here. Live with me. I will teach you to control this 'tingle' of yours and help you get vengeance on those fools of the Light who have hurt you. That is, of course, provided you want vengeance..."

Harry thought back to his short life. His parents who were either angry at him or trying to hide him from the face of the world, the other people who either feared him or treated him like a leper, and those people sacrificing him for Francis. Everything lately seemed to be for Francis. The darkness simmering in his heart sparked again and Harry looked back at Voldemort with eyes that seemed older than his three and a half years.

"How do I know you won't do what they did?"

Voldemort started. He had not expected such an adult question from a child. Said child was looking at him with an intensity to rival the Dark Lord's own.

Voldemort was silent for a long while. Finally he muttered, "You have my word."

He waved his wand and a dark ribbon of light shot out, binding itself between his wrist and Harry's. It was a darker version of the Unbreakable Vow.

Harry examined his wrist. "Cool!" he pronounced, grinning. "But what do you get out of all this?"

"Your alliance is enough. I have a feeling this 'tingle' of yours will be most helpful to my cause."

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Voldemort had left Harry with a large plate of food and the ministrations of a house elf. He was now pacing in his huge study, absently ignoring Nagini, who slithered up near him.

-Masssssster...- the snake hissed. -You seem... troubled. It is the Light-boy issss it not?-

-Yesssss... I am wondering whether I have made the right choice in thissssss, Nagini.-

-Then why do you not seek their advice, Masssssster?-

Voldemort blinked. Why not indeed? He wondered why it had not come to him sooner. The Dark Lord raised the sleeve of his left arm. Where his Death Eaters had the Dark Mark imprinted upon this arm, Voldemort had a different mark altogether. It was a tattoo of a flickering flame, blowing breeze, rustling leaf and moving waves that all surrounded a hissing green serpent with silver eyes. It was a mark that all Heirs of Slytherin were supposed to have.

Voldemort pressed the mark and it glowed for an instant. He positioned himself regally on a throne-like chair as he waited. A moment later, they arrived.

The three men were dressed in yellow, red and green while the woman was dressed in blue. It did not take much to know that they were not wizards. They bowed down before Voldemort and then stood up once more.

"I assume you know what has just taken place," the Dark Lord stated.

A slight smile crossed the face of the one dressed in green. "It would have been hard to miss."

"And so uncharacteristic of you," the one dressed in yellow commented. "We assume of course you had your reasons for doing so."

"The boy has a strange kind of power," the Dark Lord paused. "Nothing like I have ever seen. What I wish to know is whether it can be harnessed properly or whether Wormtail is right and it will merely keep getting out of control."

"The boy's powers are... unusual," the one in yellow mused. "But not unheard of... I faintly remember hearing of something like that. Hearing, mind. I will try to recall what it is but something tells me it is important."

"With the right training, the boy's powers can be harnessed," the one in red spoke out. "But it will take time. And it will be very dangerous."

"I can spare the time," the Dark Lord offered. "As for danger... the boy will have to live with it. Siding with the Dark Order is dangerous enough."

"Aithinne did not mean it was dangerous for the boy, Lord Voldemort," the woman in blue melodiously told him. "He meant that it could be dangerous for you as well."

The Dark Lord waited for the woman to continue. "One wrong move in handling this boy and he could just as easily lose control of his powers. And I fear that what you have seen of these said powers has barely scratched the surface. There is more, much more, underneath. So walk carefully."

Voldemort laughed mirthlessly. "I hardly need your warnings, Braon. I have lived with danger all my life. And I will take care not to underestimate the boy. Do you believe though, that I made the right decision in keeping him here?"

"For him, yes, it was the right decision," the one in yellow spoke out. "For you... only time will tell, my lord."

The Dark Lord nodded as he leisurely stroked Nagini's back. These four, and these four only, were the ones he could count on in matters of advice. His Death Eaters were all rather incompetent in that area.

“The boy’s training will begin next week,” he informed them. “And you four will be his first teachers.”

He was met with a stony silence.

“What a lovely way to spend my time,” Aithinne, the one in red, grumbled. “Teaching a child. God forbid.”

“What in Merlin’s name are we to teach him?” the one in green demanded.

“Charms, Transfiguration, Potions... basic magic,” the Dark Lord told them. “I want him taught well and with the exception of myself, there is no one here in this place capable of having him in their hands. I will be checking up on him.”

“I suppose we should have expected this,” Braon, the lady in blue, sighed.

An amused smirk graced the Dark Lord’s face. “You more than the others, Braon. You may go now. I will summon you when you are needed once more.”

In a flash of light, the four of them vanished. The Dark Lord lay back, thinking on the conversation he had just had. Yes, he was certain now that he was making the right decision. And with his servants teaching, his contact with the boy was kept to a bare minimum. Harry, the boy had said. Voldemort scowled at the name. That name would most definitely have to go.

The Dark Lord stood up. He had other matters to attend to, not the least of which was a very important prisoner still under the Imperius Curse.

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Dumbledore stroked Fawkes’ feathers as the phoenix trilled out a note. He had been talking to Miranda and Keelan Eveleigh earlier and even they expressed surprise at the unexpected sorrow both James and Lily had felt at the loss of Harry. Dumbledore sighed. He was

displeased that Lewis Sinclair had thrown the child in the path of the Killing Curse but it had been a choice between Harry or Francis. And with the trouble Harry had been giving Lily and James, Dumbledore, though he was loath to admit it, thought that perhaps Lewis had done the right thing.

A knock on his door brought him out of his reverie. "Enter," the headmaster called out.

Minerva McGonagall came in, supporting another woman by the arm. She looked so grim, Dumbledore immediately deduced something was wrong.

The other woman threw back the hood of her cloak and Dumbledore was caught in surprise. "Perenelle?"

"Albus," the other woman nodded, tiredly. Dumbledore saw her red-rimmed eyes and situations began racing through his head. It did not prepare him, though, for what she had to say.

"I heard about the attack today. At the Longbottoms," Perenelle Flamel offered as she and Minerva sat down in front of him.

Dumbledore nodded, conjuring up some tea and biscuits. Perenelle didn't even look at them. "I know how he did it, Albus. I know how the Dark Lord managed to break through the defenses of the Longbottom residence."

Dumbledore remained silent while Perenelle took a deep breath. "You-Know-Who used him. He captured him and used him."

"Used who, Penny?" Albus asked softly.

Perenelle looked up at him with haunted eyes. "Nicolas."

Yeah, yeah Voldie has Nicolas Flamel and Harry Potter now. Go Death Eaters! Whooo! Just joking... In case you're wondering who the four weirdos Voldie was talking to were, I'm not telling. Yet. And I managed to complete this chapter in less than a day! Go me!

Chapter Five: Stephen Gaunt

Harry was happily eating breakfast in the dim bedroom the following morning. It was a tad brighter than yesterday, but to his opinion the room was still dim. Harry liked it, though. It had a sort of understated elegance to it.

The boy was still trying to come to terms with what had happened to him. Certainly a good night's sleep had helped with that. He was going to be living here now. His eyes narrowed for a moment as he remembered the reason why he was here. He needed to control the 'tingle'. And when he did have it under control, he would show them all. All the people who had shunned him. He would be far better than Francis Eveleigh.

Harry frowned. Not that he had anything against Francis. Francis was, after all, the only person who had ever shown kindness to him. He was still frowning when the doors to his room cracked open.

Harry looked up, half-expecting to see Lord Voldermorty-something or the other, enter. Instead, the boy stiffened and froze in place when a giant snake slithered into the room.

Harry had never really seen a snake up close before. He had seen some tiny ones when he watched his mother gardening but compared to this one, those snakes were puny. The scales on the back of this snake seemed to glitter in the dimness. Harry's fork clattered down to his plate as thoughts began to rush around in his head. How fast were snakes? Could he maybe run away before this one bit him? Was it poisonous? Would he die?

The snake then turned its glinting eyes to look straight at him and Harry felt sweat break out over his body. Then the snake hissed at him and miraculously enough, Harry understood what the snake was saying.

-Hello, child. There is no need to fear me- the snake hissed at him.

Harry calmed down somewhat. So the snake could talk. Maybe it wasn't so dangerous after all.

-Y-you mean you're not going to bite me?- he asked.

To say Nagini was surprised was rather a big understatement. She had come in here only to poke some fun at the Light-boy. It had been rather amusing to sense his fear when she had come in through the door. Even more amusing to see how he reacted. What was not amusing was that he could understand her and talk back.

-You ssssspeak the ssssssnake-tongue?- Nagini asked, astonished.

Harry tilted his head, confused. -Snake-tongue? What's that? I'm speaking English as you can ssssee.-

Nagini blinked. The boy did not realize he was speaking in Parseltongue. God forbid.

-My name is Harry. Do snakes have names, too?-

It took Nagini a while to realize the boy had spoken. -Yessss... I am called Nagini.-

It was in this position, boy and snake curiously regarding each other, that Voldemort found them when he strode into the room. He took one look at Harry and mistook his expression as that of fear.

"It is quite alright, boy," the Dark Lord stated. "She will not harm you."

Harry gave him a bare hint of a grin. "I know. Nagini seems pretty nice."

It was a while before the full impact of the sentence registered on Voldemort. His eyes narrowed. "How did you know her name?"

Harry looked confused. "She told me."

Voldemort's eyes widened. -He can ssssspeak the ssssssnake-tongue, masssster- Nagini supplied.

Harry frowned. "What's this snake-tongue that you keep talking about, Nagini?" he grumbled.

Voldemort got over his initial shock. "She means that you are a Parselmouth, boy! You can talk to snakes!"

Harry blinked. "Oh."

Oh? The Dark Lord's mind was whirling. 'The boy finds out he is a Parselmouth and all he can say is 'Oh?'' the Dark Lord thought frantically.

Voldemort forced himself to calm down. "Tell me, child. Harry. Have you always been able to do this?"

Harry thought for a moment. "I don't know. I've never really seen a snake up close before so I wouldn't know."

Voldemort stared at him for a while. He needed to think about this. Only the descendants of Salazar Slytherin could speak Parseltongue. Was the boy one of those descendants? Highly impossible! The Dark Lord tried to calm down. He would get to the bottom of this later. Right now, there was something else that he needed to tell the boy.

"Child," he spoke rather impatiently. "Now that we have established that you will be living here, you need a new name. I refuse to take responsibility for anyone who carries the surname Potter. So as of this day, you will not be called Harry any longer but you will be known as Stephen."

"Stephen?" Harry questioned.

Voldemort nodded decisively. "Yes," his eyes narrowed. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Well, nothing really. It's just... why Stephen?"

The Dark Lord raised a brow. "It suits you."

"It does?" Harry thought for a moment. "Sounds okay. But if my last name isn't Potter anymore, what is it?"

Voldemort paused, his gaze sliding from Harry to Nagini then back to Harry again. "Gaunt," Voldemort murmured softly.

"What?" Harry asked, confused but Nagini gave something akin to a gasp.

"Gaunt. Your name is Stephen Gaunt, boy," the Dark Lord said more forcefully this time. "Remember that."

"Stephen Gaunt," Harry murmured then looked up. "But that sounds like a zombie's name!"

Voldemort stared impassively down at him. "Do I look as though I care? That will be your name, whether it sounds like a zombie's or not!"

Harry scowled. "Hmph. Why does it have to be Gaunt, anyhow? Why can't I have a cool name like Maximilian or Christof?" then he looked curiously up to Voldemort. "Say, what's your full name?"

"I have already told you it is Lord Voldemort!"

"Is that really the name your parents gave you? Somehow, I just can't think of any mom who would name her kid Lord Vordredmorter or something," Harry finished lamely. "It's kinda hard to say... but what's your real, real name?"

Voldemort clenched his jaw. "My given name, boy, was Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"So I can call you Tom then!"

"You most certainly will not!" Voldemort hissed angrily. "You may call me 'Master' or 'My Lord'."

Harry scrunched up his face again. "But you're not my master or my lord! It seems all wrong."

"I do not give a sickle what you consider right or wrong, child!"

"Well, if I can't have the name Maximilian or Christof, maybe I can call you Maximilian or Christof!" Harry proclaimed triumphantly.

Voldemort swore he heard Nagini cover up what sounded suspiciously like a snicker. "You will do no such thing!" he roared.

Harry sighed. "Yeah, come to think of it. Maximilian or Christof doesn't exactly suit you... So what do I call you?"

"I have already said, boy - "

"I know!" Harry interrupted. "I'll try to think up of a name. But while I don't have one yet, can I call you Tom?"

Voldemort looked ready to kill but took a deep breath. "Boy, I give you until the end of this day to think of whatever name you want but tomorrow, I had better not hear the name 'Tom' coming from you or there will be extremely dire consequences!"

Harry nodded, grinning. He liked playing around with Tom. It was fun. Said man, though, was collecting himself.

"I also came here to tell you," he continued. "That your lessons on magic will begin next week." Harry perked up at that. "I already have teachers for you. I have a hunch that by starting you this early on magic, we will be able to achieve a semblance of control over your... 'tingle'."

"Okay," Harry agreed, intensity creeping back into his eyes once more as he remembered the reason he was here.

Voldemort gave the boy a look. There was one more thing he wanted to try on the boy before he left. Without giving the boy a warning, he raised his wand. "Legilimens!"

Taken aback, Harry could not stop him as Voldemort began assaulting his mind and memories. The panicked boy cried out a loud

NO! in his mind and then Voldemort found himself back in his own mind once more.

He blinked. What had just happened? Had the boy just thrown off his mental attack? He looked over at Harry who was breathing hard and looking just as shocked as Voldemort. The Dark Lord realized what had happened. It was the boy's own power. What he called the 'tingle'. It had raised up natural mindblocks as soon as it had felt the boy was in danger.

Voldemort was regarding Harry speculatively now. This was probably what Braon meant about what he had seen of the boy's powers barely scratching the surface. Merlin forbid. Voldemort didn't think he'd even heard about natural mindblocks.

Without another word to Harry/Stephen, he swept spectacularly out of the room, Nagini at his heels.

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Dumbledore stood watching from a distance as Lily and James stood in front of Harry's tombstone, their postures ramrod straight. It was clear to him now that Lily and James must have, to some extent, loved their son. It was only Harry's strangeness that had kept that love hidden away, and had not surfaced until said son was gone. Strange, how even fear can sometimes mask the most powerful of emotions.

Beside Dumbledore stood Healer Wycksworth. When Albus turned to look at him, though, his eyes were trained not on the Potters but on the Eveleighs. Miranda was cradling a sniffling Francis near her but Keelan was coolly meeting Daedarus' glare with his own. A moment later, the two broke off eye contact but Dumbledore had seen enough.

"I suppose you think this is for the best," he commented quietly, gesturing to James and Lily.

The healer snorted. "It was a matter of time, Dumbledore. Either the boy would rain down destruction on us or on himself."

Dumbledore didn't speak for a moment but when he did it was an entirely different topic altogether. "I thought you were fine with Keelan Eveleigh being in the Order."

A small snarl escaped the Healer. "You still trust him, don't you? Well I don't! His son may be the prophecy child but there is no telling whether or not he will - "

"Enough!" Dumbledore firmly stated. "I have given my views on this. I know Keelan Eveleigh, and if you get past your prejudices, you will too."

Daedarus didn't reply. Instead, he muttered something to Dumbledore and left. As soon as he had left, Severus Snape came up to Dumbledore, dark robes billowing.

"Headmaster, we must talk," the Potions master said smoothly in a low voice.

"I already know what you have to say, Severus. Perenelle came to me yesterday and informed me herself."

Snape blinked. "Surely you realize that Nicolas Flamel in the hands of the Dark Lord is a very dangerous weapon."

"Nicolas has taken the proper precautions," Dumbledore said twiddling his thumbs. "We have addressed this as a remote possibility but a possibility nonetheless and you needn't worry. The Sorcerer's Stone is someplace safe."

"When do you plan on telling the Order?" Snape questioned.

At that moment, most of the people in the funeral were walking away from the gravestone and towards Dumbledore. The headmaster turned to Snape. "Right now, Severus."

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Harry grinned as he walked down the shadowy corridors, clutching his wand tightly in one hand. Tom (he frowned, he still needed a

name for him) had given him the wand a while ago saying that it was to be used strictly for his studies unless the Dark Lord stated otherwise. It didn't matter if it was strictly for studies. Harry knew kids his age didn't have wands and he was extremely proud to already have one.

Voldemort was off on a meeting and he had - after some initial hesitation - given Harry permission to explore the huge manor. He had placed a spell on Harry's wand, though, that allowed it to give off green sparks whenever Harry came to a place that Tom decreed forbidden to him. Harry had conscientiously avoided those places. If Tom was gracious enough to give him a place to stay here, the least he could do was try to obey.

He turned another hallway and then paused, unsure of where he was now. He gripped his wand tighter as he hesitantly took a step forward and found himself in front of two huge double doors. Tentatively he touched the doors. No green sparks. So he was allowed in here. He pushed one heavy door and it slowly creaked open the rest of the way on its own.

Harry took a step inside and found himself in the middle of towering shelves of books. His eyes widened. He had seen books in Godric's Hollow and though his mother taught him how to read early on, reading had been more of a chore really. But his eyes itched right now to know what was in those books. They seemed so... different but in an exciting interesting way.

He ran inside the library, footsteps echoing as he painstakingly perused the titles of the books. He couldn't understand most of them as they looked so old and the letterings were so intricate. But eventually, he found himself in front of a rather new looking blue bound book. Squinting, he read the title slowly. Names and Their Meanings, it stated quite simply. Names!

Using both of his small hands, he pulled it out. It fell to the floor in a cloud of dust. Carefully setting his wand aside, Harry plopped down next to it and turned the pages. Then he began to read.

TBC

Yeah, a bit boring. And why does Wycksworth hate K. Eveleigh so much? Har har!

Coming up: a secret passageway, Stephen's clothes, and Voldemort's new name!

Chapter Six: Living With The Darkness

A strange sort of silence seemed to cloak the place, Stephen decided as he quietly shut the door of his bedroom behind him. It wasn't oppressive, nor was it eerie. It just seemed... right. His feet scuffed as he walked down the corridor, trying to recall whether it was the same one he had walked down on yesterday. He really wanted to return to the library and practice reading.

Uncertain, he stopped at a place where the corridor branched off to the left and to the right. He didn't think this had been here yesterday. But then again, he couldn't really be sure. Hesitantly, he chose the right corridor and proceeded to walk down there.

Stephen wondered whether it was just himself, the Dark Lord and Nagini who lived in this huge place. Aside from the house elves, he didn't think he'd seen anyone else here. It was kind of weird, because the huge place was definitely too big for just three of them and a couple of house elves.

Fifteen minutes later, he stopped in the middle of the corridor, completely bewildered. He had no idea where he was. Stephen turned to look around.

"Er, can anyone help me please?" he spoke tentatively but somewhat loudly.

As expected, only silence answered. "Anyone?" louder this time.

"Hellooooooooo!" Stephen's voice carried down the corridor but no one replied.

"Oh wonderful." Annoyed and more than a bit scared though he didn't want to admit it, the boy leaned back against the cold stone wall.

And he fell bum first on the ground when the wall caved in behind him. Wide-eyed, Stephen scrambled up. The portion of the wall that had caved in revealed a secret passageway. It extended a ways inside but due to the lack of light, Stephen couldn't see where or even if it ended. For a moment, the boy struggled. To go or not to go?

With a determined shrug of his small shoulders, though, he stepped inside. The passageway immediately shut behind him and plunged him in darkness. His eyes widened but before he could start screaming in panic, torches suddenly flickered with light at the side of the walls. Nervously, Stephen took a step forward. Well, he was here wasn't he? He might as well see it through to the end. If this tunnel had an end.

Gulping, Stephen walked on.

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It was a while before he reached the end of the passageway. He noted that torches didn't light the end of the passageway and he had to force himself to trudge on in darkness. The passageway became even narrower until he finally had to crawl. When he next looked up, though, he saw light pouring in from what was most probably the end of the passageway.

Grinning, Stephen crawled over to it. The passageway ended in a small, circular glass window. The boy crouched near it and looked out the window. What he saw made him freeze.

The window was overlooking a huge room. It was probably five times as large as the Longbottom ballroom. The room was slightly circular and - like the rest of the manor - it was richly and darkly elegant. The coloring was in tasteful tones of forest green and black marble. There were numerous small windows (like the one Stephen was looking out of) near the ceiling. A magnificent chandelier lent the room a muted light. Black robed figures with white masks - the ones in the Longbottom residence! - were gathering inside the said room. And in a chair atop a dais sat the Dark Lord.

Stephen paled somewhat. It had completely slipped his mind. Those black-robed people were with Lord Voldemort! The boy shifted to a more comfortable position as he watched Voldemort signal to his Death Eaters. Immediately, the hushed conversations stopped and all the Death Eaters hurried to their Lord and bowed down before him.

"Failure is not something I tolerate very well," Stephen shivered at the iciness in Voldemort's tone. "And you have all failed me in the last attack against the blasted Order."

Underneath their masks, the Death Eaters paled. They knew what was coming. Failure always equaled punishment.

Stephen felt paralyzed as the round of Cruciatus curses started. Voldemort targeted his Inner Circle first. Unbeknownst to the small boy, he had started shaking and sweating at the sight of the Cruciatus being administered. Images of his own torture flashed through his mind and his throat felt dry. Stephen didn't know for how long the Death Eaters' screams lasted. It seemed long enough.

When Voldemort pulled the curse away at last, Stephen saw most of the Death Eaters were shivering violently from the aftermath. But they still bowed down before Voldemort.

It was then that the young boy learned his first lesson: pain ignites fear, fear ignites control. For you to control someone, they had to fear you. For them to fear you, you had to break them. A shadow passed in the young boy's green eyes as this thought implanted itself firmly in his brain.

Most of Stephen's shock had passed by the time Voldemort started torturing the Death Eaters not in his Inner Circle. Somehow, their punishment was worse. Other Dark curses, interspersed with the Cruciatus, was what the Dark Lord employed. Stephen merely sat there, the images burning into his mind.

The Inner Circle Death Eaters were watching as Voldemort punished the rest. Severus Snape in particular was puzzled. He knew for a fact that the Dark Lord was displeased. This mission had been planned for months and with such great secrecy Snape had not even had time to report it to Dumbledore. And with its failure, all the Death Eaters expected Voldemort's wrath to be great. But this... the Dark Lord was punishing them harshly, yes, but there had been many harsher punishments. It was almost like Voldemort was punishing them for sport and not because he was really that angry. Snape caught himself and nearly laughed at the absurdity of the thought.

Of course Snape had no way of knowing that even though they failed, the Dark Lord was really somewhat pleased they had obtained Stephen.

Voldemort was in the middle of casting a Shatter Hex when a sudden flash of green light behind one of the small, circular windows caught Snape's attention. He jerked his head up. The light had flashed for only a moment but Snape knew what he had seen.

He turned to the Dark Lord only to see that Voldemort had seen the light, too. Voldemort paused only slightly, imperceptibly, then resumed back to torture.

Snape was astonished. Surely Voldemort would want to see what the light was? But he didn't. Snape felt disturbed. Something was going on here.

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Stephen gulped as he replaced his wand inside his robes. It had accidentally fallen off and given off the green light. The boy was sure one of the masked men had seen him. He wasn't sure if the Dark Lord had. He sincerely hoped not.

"I hope you learn your lesson this time, Death Eaters," Voldemort hissed as he kicked one who was still bleeding on the ground. "I will expect nothing less than victory the next time around."

Stephen watched mutely as the Dark Lord swept out of the room. It took a long time but soon the Death Eaters filtered out one by one, too. The little boy, though, merely sat there and let the scenes he had witnessed wash over him. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the stone wall. He didn't know how long he just sat there, which was why he was shocked when a sudden bright light filled the entire passageway. Frightened, Stephen backed up even more against the glass window.

"Boy, if you are there I expect you to get out here right now," he heard a familiar voice drawl.

Stephen didn't know whether to be relieved or apprehensive at hearing the Dark Lord's voice. Slowly, he crawled out of the narrow passageway and where the passageway was normal-sized, he saw Voldemort standing with his wand emitting the bright light.

"H-hey," Stephen grinned weakly.

The Dark Lord refrained from commenting. "I should assume then that you saw our little meeting?"

Stephen turned rigid. "W-were they your slaves?" he whispered softly.

A twisted smile from Voldemort. "Close enough. They are my followers, but little more than slaves really. It is only those in my Inner Circle who have some semblance of a brain."

"Why do they follow you?"

"Because they, like me, believe that the world should be rid of Light filth like the people who did those things to you. They look to me to make that happen so they follow me."

"But they are scared of you, too," Stephen observed. "You make sure they won't change their minds by scaring them."

The boy was perceptive. "Fear is a necessary tactic. That you will learn in time."

Stephen looked up at Voldemort and the Dark Lord grew uneasy as he realized the intensity was back in the boy's eyes. "Will you turn me into one of them?"

Voldemort forgot to breathe for a second. Did the child just ask that? "Of course not," he replied impatiently. "You are worth far more than that. That and I do not believe that you scare so easily. I doubt the same tactic would work on you, no matter how many Crucios I cast."

Stephen smiled sardonically at him. "You're right," he replied softly. "I don't scare easy."

Voldemort blinked and was silent for a moment. "Follow me. I cannot fathom how you ended up in this passageway in the first place. It was supposed to be secret."

Stephen made a face at him. "It was an accident. I was trying to find the library and I fell in."

The Dark Lord raised a brow. "The library? You know how to read then?"

"Of course!"

"Good," muttered Voldemort. "That's one thing you won't have to be taught." They emerged out of the passageway and as they left it, it shut on its own behind them. The Dark Lord strode purposefully to Stephen's rooms.

Stephen was right on his heels but the young boy stopped dead when he saw what was on his bed. "Are those mine?" he gaped.

Robes, shirts, trousers, socks, shoes, capes and other whatnot was piled high on his bed, on the sofa near the bed, and on the table near the bed. Two house elves bowed to Stephen and Voldemort and continued on their task of putting away the articles of clothing.

"Yes, of course. How did you expect to survive without clothes?"

Stephen approached the clothes and his face split into a big grin. "Thanks a lot, Thran!"

Silence, and then, "What did you call me?!"

Stephen blinked at Voldemort. "Thran," then he grinned widely again. "It's a name I found in one of the books in the library. It means - "

"It means 'mentor' or more specifically 'one who shows the way'," Voldemort interrupted. He glared at Stephen. "To what do I owe this honor?" His voice was dripping with sarcasm.

Stephen shrugged, not picking up the sarcastic tone of the Dark Lord. "Because you're kind of showing me the way on how to control my 'tingle', right?"

Voldemort wondered whether one too many Crucios had permanently damaged the child's brain because he was clearly a tad insane. The Dark Lord decided to dismiss it for now. A thick tome appeared out of thin air. Voldemort grasped it and handed it to Stephen who nearly dropped it on account of its weight.

"What is this?" the boy gasped.

"It's a book on magic. As punishment for... spying on that gathering, boy - " Stephen scowled " - I will expect you to finish this book before your lessons start next week."

"WHAT?!"

"Are you complaining?" Voldemort asked ominously.

"Uh, no," Stephen gulped.

"Very well, then. I shall leave you to your reading."

And with that said, the Dark Lord now christened Than, left.

TBC

Voldemort's new name sort of came out of the blue. Thran does not really mean mentor or one who shows the way.

I'm thinking of uploading a new story. It's called Blood Key. But I'm still not sure... Should I go for it? And what the heck is a Mary Sue?

Coming up: Stephen meets teachers

Magic is complicated

-A Beginner's Guide To Studying Magic, Ch.4 pp. 38

Chapter Seven: Lessons

Day 1...

Stephen hesitated before a door. The door was ordinary enough. Wooden, of average size, and it probably led into one of many rooms inside the manor. But... the moment he entered it, his lessons would begin. The boy sighed. After he found his teacher that is.

-Flashback-

"Your lessons will not be as simple as you think," Thran was telling him as they marched down some unknown corridor in the manor. "You will have four instructors. They are my most trusted servants. Today, you will start your lessons with the first."

"That's great! What's his name, Thran?" Stephen asked.

A sly expression crept into Voldemort's face. "You will have to ask him that... after you find him, of course."

"Huh? What do you mean find him?"

"This is part of your lesson, Stephen," the Dark Lord stopped in front of an ordinary, unmarked door. "You can only begin your lessons with your instructors when you find them. If you fail to find them, then you are not worthy of learning what they have to teach. I leave you here. From here onward, it is up to you."

-End Flashback-

Stephen pushed open the wooden door. He blinked. The door only opened out into another corridor, not much different from the one he was already on. Hesitantly, he stepped through the wooden door. Immediately, the door slammed shut behind him.

Letting out a breath, Stephen started walking. Fifteen minutes later, he was still walking on the same corridor and was getting very frustrated. There was nothing here! That was when he heard it. A high-pitched, childish giggle. Stephen blinked, clutched his wand tighter and inched forward. He heard the laughter again. He hurried his pace. That was when he saw him. It was a young boy, his own age and wearing strange clothes. The boy had a huge, toothy grin on his face and was regarding Stephen with innocent amusement.

“Hello!” the boy cheerfully greeted.

“Hi,” Stephen replied a bit warily. “I – I’m looking for my teacher. Have you seen anyone here?”

The boy merely gave him a look and giggled again. “No, silly. There are no teachers here!”

Stephen blinked. “No, he’s here. I’m sure he is.”

The boy peered at him. “Are you sure you’re not lost?”

The boy had a point. Maybe he was lost? He stared at the grinning boy again. Maybe this was just a trick to throw him off course. He set his small mouth in a grim line.

Stephen tried a new approach. “I need to know where my instructor is. Please. Can you help me?”

The other boy glanced at him speculatively and began walking. “Follow me.”

It didn’t take long before they reached another door. Stephen twitched. He had had just about enough of doors, thank you very much. The boy pushed the door open and Stephen followed him inside. Stephen gasped.

They were suddenly in a garden. There was a little river fed by a sparkling waterfall. Multicolored flowers, shady trees and trimmed

grass adorned it. The sky above head was perfectly blue and butterflies fluttered to and fro. Stephen could hardly believe this place was inside the manor. It was too darned... cheery! When he looked closer, though, he saw that aside from the butterflies, there were other things flying about. Stephen's jaw dropped. They were fairies.

"Wh – where's my teacher?" he asked the boy, confused.

The boy's mouth twitched into a grin. "He's in here but you find him."

Stephen blinked. Here? He nixed the thought of his teacher being a butterfly. So he was one of the fairies then? Stephen began to hesitantly walk around. But which fairy? There must be thousands of them here. Groaning, Stephen trudged around and began to inspect them one by one.

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It had to be nearly an hour later and he was nearly cross-eyed. It didn't help that not all the fairies appreciated being observed. Some were downright indignant. The worst thing about it all was Stephen felt fairly sure that none of those fairies were his teacher. He didn't know why or how but he just knew.

"Found him yet?" the other boy was grinning at him from under a tree.

Stephen scowled but before he could retort he realized something and berated himself for being so stupid not to have seen it in the first place. "Actually, I have found him," Stephen replied with a smirk.

"Really, where?"

Stephen pointed at him. He watched the other boy's expression turn stunned, then sly. "You're my teacher aren't you? You were just trying to mislead me!"

The boy approached him. "How did you know?"

Stephen shrugged. "Something about you felt right somehow."

The other boy didn't reply. But right in front of Stephen he started to change... The little boy who had been standing there earlier was gone and in his place was a tall man with light blue eyes and wearing light yellow robes.

"Lesson number one," the man stated, grinning. "Learn to trust your instincts. In tight spots, it's sometimes all you can rely on. Do you hear me?"

Stephen nodded, dumbfounded. "So you are..."

"This is my real form. And yes, I am your teacher. My name is Gal," the man introduced himself.

"Oh." A pause. "My name's Stephen."

"Yes, I know," Gal said, amused.

"What will you teach me?"

"Master told us that you have read the book on beginners' magic, correct?"

Stephen nodded. "I didn't really understand everything though. And I haven't tried out any of the spells."

"Good," Gal stated. "Come, let us sit underneath the shade." Stephen followed him. "Take out your wand."

When they were comfortably positioned, Gal turned to him. "Without further ado then. Do you know what a levitation charm is?"

Stephen thought for a moment. "Is it the one where you kind of make stuff fly?"

"Close enough. This is the wand movement. Watch closely. A swish and a flick." Gal demonstrated. "Now you try."

Stephen did. Gal corrected his movement and made him try again. A minute later, he had gotten it. "Good," Gal stated. He swished his own wand and two feathers appeared in front of them. "The incantation is Wingardium Leviosa. You say it while doing the wand movement. Watch me." Gal tried it and his feather gently floated up. "Your turn."

Stephen nodded. "Wingardium Leviosa!" Nothing happened at first. Five spells later, though, the feather slowly and surely started to float.

"I did it!" Stephen cried out excitedly.

"Good job," Gal told him wryly. "But we've only just begun."

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Day 2...

Stephen slowly pushed the wooden door and entered the room. Unlike yesterday, the door did not lead into another corridor, though. This time the door led into a room. A room that looked decidedly familiar to Stephen... He stepped in and tried to remember where he had seen this room before. Then it hit him. This room was Healer Wycksworth's dungeon! The door behind him slammed shut and a figure walked out of the shadows. Stephen froze in place as Healer Wycksworth loomed over him.

"Hello, Harry," the man gave a malicious grin. "Did you honestly think you could escape me?"

Stephen gave a small whimper and backed into the wall. The Healer advanced onto him, wand held high. "Let's get started, shall we?"

This seemed to jerk Stephen out of his stupor and he dodged the light of the Cruciatus that the Healer had just shot from his wand. He felt terrified but absolutely refused to back down. Surely Thran would come soon to save him from Wycksworth? But the Healer was preparing to crucio him again. Stephen cast the only charm he knew.

“ Wingardium Leviosa!” A big, heavy desk went sailing to Wycksworth and knocked him unconscious.

Stephen stepped closer but before he could inspect the man to make sure he was really out, the room seemed to spin and fade with him in the center. Stephen felt a new fear. What was happening now? Soon, the room solidified again and this time he was in his bedroom in Potter Manor.

Stephen blinked. None of this could be real. The door to his bedroom slammed open and in walked a very angry James and Lily Potter. Stephen’s eyes widened.

“Mummy? Daddy?” he whispered, recognizing their furious faces as the expressions they wore before they spanked him for being bad. Then he set his face in a grim countenance. “This isn’t real. This isn’t real.”

“Harry James Potter!” Lily started to yell. “What on earth do you think you’re doing? Where did you get that wand? I thought we’d already warned you to keep away from wands but obviously you were not listening!...”

Stephen’s eyes blazed. “You’re not real! You’re not real!”

James was advancing towards him with a rather big stick to spank him with. Stephen pointed his wand at them, not really knowing what he was doing and the only frantic thought that penetrated his mind was a seeming message to his wand: do something! Amazingly enough, a jet of blue fire emitted from his wand and hit James and Lily. Then the room began to dissolve again.

Stephen stood his ground, prepared for it this time. His grip on his wand tightened. He was in a graveyard and the soil at his feet was being shaken loose. He watched in horror as creatures began to emerge from their graves in front of him. The rotten figures were soon standing before him and Stephen recognized them as Inferi. He had always been afraid of Inferi.

Stephen gulped. He was out of spells and he didn't know what to do. For the first time in his entire life, Stephen wished the tingle would come out and at least do something! He did not want to die here like this. Even though his logic screamed at him that this was not real, what he was seeing before him now overrode those thoughts. The Inferi were dragging themselves closer to him.

Stephen backed off but soon they had formed a ring around him and were closing in on him. He closed his eyes. He hoped Thran would at least find his body. His grip on his wand slackened.

Stephen waited for the attack but it never came. Confused, he opened his eyes. He was inside a spacious room. In the middle of the room was a fountain that reflected blue light to the walls. The walls and floor were made of cool marble, there was a bookshelf with numerous books, and other shelves filled with weird things like herbs and such on them. Elegantly carved tables were scattered throughout the room. There were a number of interesting objects on them, such as tarot cards, rune diagrams, number charts. Stephen cautiously walked around the room.

"You did very well," a cool, melodious voice spoke out.

Stephen spun around and saw a woman draped in blue robes regarding him from the other side of the room.

The woman stood up and walked over to him. "You could not have gotten here if you had not managed to overcome your fear of every obstacle I placed in your path. You were quite right, of course. None of them were real."

"So they were some kind of test?" Stephen whispered.

"Yes, a test from which I hope you learned your lesson," she smiled indulgently. "Lesson number two: fear is a crippling entity. You must learn to face your fear and conquer it, not let it conquer you."

"Face my fears," Stephen murmured. Yes, those really had been things he had feared. "Who're you?"

The beautiful lady smiled gently at him. "My name is Braon. Your second teacher. Come."

Stephen followed her as she led him to the other end of the room. There was a cauldron sitting there innocently, with bright blue flames flickering underneath. On a table beside it were a series of strange ingredients that Stephen stared at. Some of them were familiar from the book Thran had made him read. But most were completely foreign to the young boy.

"What are you going to teach me, Miss Braon?" he asked.

"Just Braon will do," the woman replied as she stood on the other end of the cauldron. "Today, you will learn and appreciate the intricate art of potion making, young one. That is what I have been assigned to teach you."

Stephen observed Braon for a second. Something about her puzzled him. The same something he had noticed in Gal but couldn't place what. "Braon, you and Gal aren't real wizards are you?"

Braon stood still and was silent for a moment before turning to him and smiling. "You're a very smart child. No, we're not."

"I knew it! But if you aren't wizards, what are you?"

There was a strange sort of light in Braon's eyes before she responded. "We are elementals."

o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

Day 3...

Stephen stared in astonishment as the creature in front of him began to transform. The fur melted into skin, the eyes grew bigger and turned human and the small rodent grew larger and larger until Stephen was standing face to face with a man in green robes. The

man was big and scruffy with a shaggy beard. He gave Stephen's clothes a disdainful glare.

"I have to hand it to you, you're good," the man's voice was rough as well. "I never expected you to find me in such a short time span."

Stephen found his tongue. "Short time span? I've been searching for over five hours!"

The man barked out a short laugh. "Normal wizards wouldn't be able to find me for days."

"Days?" Stephen squeaked.

The man scowled. "You don't look like you have much to you... and for future lessons, boy, I don't want you wearing fancy things such as that," he indicated Stephen's robes. "Wear something more suitable for the outdoors. There'll be no classrooms here I can tell you that."

Stephen frowned but nodded. "I'm Stephen. What's your name?"

"Scaithin," the man told him. "I'm the earth elemental and I'm here to teach you to survive."

"What?" Stephen asked. Scaithin was striding away into the forest (the room had been transformed into a forest when he had entered and Stephen had no earthly idea how) and Stephen scrambled to catch up to him. His long robes did make catching up a tad bit difficult considering they kept snagging. Merlin knew what. "Teach me to survive what?"

"There's much more to wizardry than saying words and waving your silly wand, though it may seem like that. There's always more to things than what they seem. That's your third lesson. Remember that there are hidden things that one cannot see with the naked eye. Always be on the lookout," Scaithin growled at him.

Stephen nodded mechanically. "Yes, mister Scaithin, sir. But you still haven't answered my question. Teach me to survive what?"

Scraithin suddenly halted and Stephen skidded to a stop with him. He pointed to a bush beside Stephen. The boy turned to it. It had glossy green leaves and bright yellow and red striped flowers. "Hayken bush. What do you think about it?"

"It's pretty," Stephen grinned as he reached out to touch the flowers.

"It's poisonous. Brief contact with the skin is enough to render a man unconscious. It's a main ingredient in the Draught of Living Death." Stephen quickly withdrew his hand.

Scraithin smiled tightly. "There you have it, boy. There is much more to wizardry than meets the eye. When you fight by the Master, especially, you have to learn a lot about the Wizarding World. This knowledge, coupled with the experience which you're about to get here will help you survive."

"What kind of experience?"

"Surviving in the outdoors and such like, child."

"You mean like camping or something?"

"Close enough. But not today. Today, you will learn of magical plants and creatures," Scraithin pointed out some tufty leaves protruding from the ground. "Come closer but don't pull the leaves or the plant for that matter. Those plants are called Mandrakes..."

o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

Day 4...

Every bone in his body ached. Stephen winced as he reached out to open the wooden door for his next lesson with his last teacher. He had hiked Merlin knew how many miles with Scraithin yesterday and though it didn't bother the elemental at all, it was still a rather new experience for the boy. After their lesson, Scraithin had merely looked him up and down and said, "You'll get used to it." Indeed.

Stephen entered the door and as usual it shut behind him. What was not usual was that the moment the door shut, tongues of flames erupted from torches lining the walls. Nor was the flaming fireball headed directly for Stephen the least bit normal.

“Aaaaahhh!” he ducked and the fireball scorched the door behind him. Eyes wide, he glanced around. He didn’t even want to think of what kind of test this was.

There were numerous doors along the corridor, he noticed. In fact, Stephen gulped, the doors didn’t seem to end at all. Just went on and on indefinitely. Did he have to check all those doors to find his teacher?

Tentatively, he stepped forward. He had just laid a hand on the doorknob of the first door when the fine hairs at the nape of his head stood on end. He stepped sideways just in time as a volley of arrows erupted from the wall behind him and studded the door he was about to open.

“Do I have to die to pass this test?” he muttered.

He waved his hand at the door. The coast seemed clear now. He pushed open the first door. Nothing. Bloody wonderful. He moved on to the second door but in slow, measured steps. Hesitantly, he touched the doorknob. Something silvery whistled behind him and Stephen snatched his hand away just in time as a twelve inch knife landed where his hand had been seconds ago. Stephen gulped. His hand shaking, he pushed open the door. Nothing.

He moved on to the third door. This time, he inspected it thoroughly first before pushing on it. The moment his hand came into contact with the wood of the door, though, electricity traveled up his arm and shocked him. The pain was burning and jolting all at once. Stephen pulled back his hand with much effort and backed into the wall, gasping. What in Merlin kind of test was this?

On and on he went. Fourth door, fifth door, sixth door... He was met with flying curses and hexes, more weapons thrown at him and even traps like a gaping hole suddenly opening up in the floor.

“Okay!” Stephen yelled the moment he shut an empty thirty first door. “That’s it! I’ve had enough! Where on earth are you anyway?”

A deep, throaty chuckle answered him. He froze. Stephen looked wildly around for the source of the sound but found nothing. He breathed deeply. His teacher had to be around here somewhere. Somewhere close. He stood there silently and thought. Gal, his first instructor, had been an air elemental, that much he was sure. Braon was water, painfully clear from her robes and her watery room. Scraithin had concisely informed him he was earth. So if his four instructors represented the four elements that could only leave his fourth instructor as...

“Fire,” Stephen whispered gazing at the torches that lined the corridor.

Tentatively, he walked to the nearest torch and extended his hand to it. The moment his hand touched the flame, it grew higher and higher and higher. Balls of flame shot from it and Stephen had to dodge to avoid them. A laugh resounded in the corridor.

“I must say I am pleased. You have done very well,” a smooth voice announced.

Stephen looked up from where he had fallen on the ground. A man with long dark hair and dressed in red robes stood in front of him. The man smirked. “Fire. Very good indeed. It seems as though you have learned something from Gal.”

“Tell me Stephen. Have you had any training at all? You were very adept at avoiding my obstacles,” the fire elemental commented.

Stephen glanced warily at him. “I had to avoid them. I don’t wanna die yet.”

The man chuckled. "Too true. I am called Aithinne by the way. Your fourth and last instructor. Those obstacles weren't merely obstacles. I wish to test your aptitude on defense against magic and physical objects. I'm much impressed."

"Defense against magic?" Stephen asked, curiously. "Is that what you're going to be teaching me?"

"More or less. Combat and defense magic is more accurate. Both physically and mentally."

"Mentally?"

"Yes. Master told me that you have natural mindblocks so I suppose we need to focus more on Legilimency than Occlumency."

Stephen hadn't a clue what Aithinne was prattling on about. He merely nodded.

Aithinne led him into a room and told him to take out his wand.

"Now then, young Stephen," the fire elemental spoke, flames bursting to life behind him. "We shall begin."

TBC

I realize this is by far my longest chapter. Originally, I planned to devote one whole chapter to each elemental teacher that Stephen had but I was halfway through when I ran out of ideas and realized it was incredibly dragging. So I cut the air and water parts and just wrote earth and fire. Sorry if you don't like it. I had a lot of trouble with this chapter.

Chapter Nine: The Big Picture

Voldemort sat in a deceptively relaxed posture on his throne, Nagini resting at his feet. Only those looking into the Dark Lord's eyes would see the alertness glinting in them. A wind swept into the room, slightly ruffling Voldemort's hair but he paid it no heed, save to move to a more upright position. His eyes followed the wind's trajectory as if this was what he had been expecting. The wind morphed into a man with yellow robes who bowed on one knee in the center of the room.

"Gal," Voldemort stated upon seeing his elemental. "You say you have information for me."

"Master," the air elemental replied, rising from his position. "I believe I know something about young Stephen's powers."

"Very well. Come closer and say what it is you have found out."

"I have delved deep into the history of all magical beings, Master. A power such as that of Stephen's is very rare but not unheard of. When I speak of rare, I mean that it only emerges once every thousand years and aside from Stephen, there have been only two previous wizards who were rumored to have this power," Gal told the Dark Lord. "I say rumored because it was never proven whether the powers they possessed was this power."

"And what is this power?" Voldemort asked a tad impatiently.

"It has no name, Master. But it is mentioned in the books as the Darkness. Basically, it is the power of destruction. The power to destroy anything at all, including magic," Gal replied calmly.

"When you say to destroy anything including magic, you mean..."

"Yes, Master. Anything. I am hazarding a guess that when you shot Stephen with the Killing Curse his darkness, in an effort to protect him, destroyed your Killing Curse."

"So anything really means anything. If the boy can harness his power properly, he can destroy any curses or spells cast his way," Voldemort murmured.

"True. He can destroy anything he wants. This includes even metaphysical things such as emotions, memories, thoughts... If he could learn how, he could even destroy a person's soul, a power akin to a dementor's," Gal explained, the awe in his voice obvious.

"This still does not explain the bubble I found the boy in or his natural mindblocks," Voldemort pointed out.

"I know, Master. This has led me to believe that the Darkness is not Stephen's only power. The Darkness is merely his dominant power right now. But given time, I believe that his hidden power will reveal itself," Gal told Voldemort.

"Interesting. Still, this Darkness you speak of is very, very intriguing..." Voldemort trailed off.

A sudden shrill clang interrupted the silence. Voldemort looked towards the closed door of the room. "Very well, Gal. We shall continue this conversation another time. Good work."

The elemental bowed and in a rush of wind, disappeared. Voldemort pointed his wand to the door and the doors slowly opened. A dark-cloaked figure hurriedly strode inside the room and bowed before the Dark Lord. Voldemort allowed silence to reign for a while, enjoying the obvious discomfort of the Death Eater standing before him. When the Dark Lord felt that the silence was becoming utterly unbearable for the Death Eater, he suppressed a malicious smile and spoke.

"Severus."

"My Lord," Snape crept to Voldemort and kissed the hem of his robes, carefully avoiding Nagini who lazily opened one golden eye.

"I trust you have some information for me?"

"Of course, my Lord."

"Well, hurry up and tell me what it is, Severus," Voldemort lazily twirled his wand in his fingers, seeing Snape's eyes fearfully follow the path of the wand. Snape didn't find his voice until a few seconds later.

"Er, the Order of the Phoenix has planned a gathering, my Lord. It is the largest gathering of the Order that has been planned in two years," Snape informed him.

Voldemort's brow merely rose but he said nothing. Snape took it as a sign to continue talking. "The Order has not yet found a suitable place as their permanent headquarters, my Lord, and this meeting will be held in the Hopkins' manor. Understandably, the security measures will be far tighter approaching the point of paranoia as ensured by Alastor Moody. They will be expecting anything from a spy to a full out attack. The meeting will be in seven months as it will take them that long to set up all the necessary security precautions."

"And the purpose of this overly exalted meeting will be?"

"They plan to devise a way to rescue the wizard Flamel, my Lord," Snape answered smoothly.

"Ah. Of coursssse..." Voldemort hissed with a smile. "They want their... friend back. Dumbledore most especially. They are prepared to do anything to rescue him are they not?"

At a loss for words, Severus merely nodded.

"Well I am not about to give up one of my most formidable weapons so easily!" Voldemort murmured. "This information certainly has been of some value, Severus. You have not been neglecting your spy duties after all."

"I would never even consider neglecting my duties, my Lord," Snape mumbled.

"Would you not, Severus?" Voldemort maliciously spoke. "Is the escape of Flamel the only agenda to be discussed in this so-called meeting?"

"They are also planning to find a new location for the Sorcerer's Stone, my Lord. They believe that you will try and take it," Snape added.

"Not an unfounded fear..." Voldemort commented. "When you discover the location of the Sorcerer's Stone, let me know."

Snape bit his lip. When not if. "Yes, my Lord," was all Snape said. One simply did not say no to Voldemort.

"That is all. You may go now," Voldemort dismissed him.

"As my Lord wishes," Snape muttered, kissing the hem of Voldemort's expensive robes once more and bowing out. He considered himself lucky to escape a solitary audience unscathed.

Voldemort watched as Snape exited the room. The man was a member of his Inner Circle and one of the most accomplished Potions Masters in the entire world. Voldemort could not quite put a finger to it but something about Snape still... unsettled him. Frowning slightly, the Dark Lord pushed the thought to the back of his mind. He stood up.

-Come, Nagini. Let us go and pay Nicolas Flamel a little visit...- he hissed.

Voldemort stared at the old wizard chained in front of him. After only a few days with the Dark Lord, the great wizard was now only a shadow of his former self. His robes were dirty and tattered, there were numerous cuts and bruises down his body and his eyes were clouded and glazed with pain. Voldemort knew that Flamel was only vaguely aware of his presence. He had cast a spell on the man that placed Flamel in a constant state of pain. The Dark Lord could not afford to have Flamel clear-headed, even for one second. The spell placed was one Voldemort had invented himself and was rightfully proud of.

"It seems as though your Mudblood-loving friends have decided to convene to figure out how to rescue you," Voldemort spoke, knowing that the man could only half hear what was being said. "I cannot, of course, let them succeed. I have many plans for you yet."

-What do you plan to do, Masssssster?- Nagini inquired as she slithered around Flamel, who cringed at her cold scales.

-Strengthen the protection around him, Nagini- Voldemort replied as he raised his wand and began casting new spells and raising even more powerful wards around Nicolas Flamel. Stephen fidgeted again. Beside him, he heard Gal sigh.

"All right, that is probably enough for today," the air elemental declared. "You are not paying attention anymore."

Stephen opened his eyes and moved his legs that were cramped from having had to sit motionless too long. He stifled a yawn. The whole lesson had made him rather sleepy.

"Sleepy?" Gal frowned. "We'll have to work on that. Meditation is not falling asleep, young one."

"Why do I need to study meditation anyway?" Stephen piped up, curious.

"That strange power of yours - "

"You mean the tingle?" Stephen interrupted.

"Yes. Tingle. Master says that you often lose control of it. Meditation is a tool for centering yourself. When you have learned how to center yourself, your powers become a tad more... stable. That is why it is important that you learn meditation," Gal explained.

"Oh..." Gal stood up and Stephen followed suit.

"Very well. This ends our lesson for today. I hope you have learned something?"

Stephen grinned. "I learned lots!"

"Good. I will see you after three days. I expect you to practice every night," Gal told him as Stephen raced towards the door.

"Sure, Gal!" Stephen called back.

The young boy ran down the corridor. He wondered where Thran was. He wanted to ask him about his teachers. Stephen had read up on elementals. They were free spirits that embodied the elements. But Gal, Scraithin, Braon and Aithinne did not seem like normal elementals. And why did they call Thran 'master'? Stephen merely wanted to know.

Nicolas Flamel watched, half-conscious as Voldemort stepped back and surveyed his spellwork. The Dark Lord nodded, satisfied. Flamel bit back another scream. He did not know what spell Voldemort had cast but it was pain, all pain all the time. The pain only went away when the Dark Lord put him under the Imperius. And in many ways, that was even worse than having to go through the pain spell. When he was under the Imperius he was forced to watch his body being used by the Dark Lord to do horrible things.

But still... the pain was unbearable.

"Thran?"

The voice penetrated through the fog of pain and taking a great deal of effort, Nicolas strained his eyes to see. There was the shape of a small child behind the Dark Lord. Nicolas wasn't sure if the child was real or not. Most probably he was just a product of Nicolas' pain-addled mind. The child walked to the Dark Lord who spun around and hissed something at the boy that Nicolas did not hear.

Nicolas had convinced himself that the boy was nothing more than an illusion before he passed out.

"What do you think you are doing here, boy?!" Voldemort raged, pulling Stephen out of the dungeon room and slamming the door behind him.

"Who was that, Thran?" Stephen asked, completely oblivious to the Dark Lord's sparking eyes.

"None of your business, insolent child!" Voldemort's hand was itching to crucio the boy.

"He seemed really hurt, though," Stephen looked up and only then did he notice Voldemort's furious expression.

"Oh... Uh, I shouldn't have been here, should I?"

"No!" Voldemort spat out. "How in Merlin's name did you even find me?"

"I asked one of the house elves," Stephen answered innocently. Voldemort made a mental note to punish all the house elves later.

The Dark Lord suppressed the great urge to physically harm Stephen, spun around and hissed at Nagini to follow. Stephen ran after him.

"Thran, wait!"

"Don't you have lessons today?" Voldemort demanded furiously. "Listen to me, boy, and listen good. The next time you ever try searching for me in this manor again, I will hang you by your toes, do you understand?! You do not come to me, I come to you! Now what in Salazar's name do you want? It had better be damned important!"

Stephen merely tossed his threats away with a good-natured grin. "I just wanted to ask you about my teachers. They're elementals, right?"

"What an astute observation," Voldemort declared sarcastically.

"Aren't elementals free spirits? They don't serve wizards like house elves do. So how come Gal, Aithinne, Braon and Scraithin call you master?"

Voldemort led Stephen down the corridor and up a flight of stairs until they reached the little boy's bedroom. Only then did he begin to speak. "Your instructors are not normal elementals. They are more

powerful than your usual, run-of-the-mill elementals. To make a long story short, I inherited them."

"Er, what?"

"I am a descendant of Salazar Slytherin, boy. Surely you have heard of him?" At Stephen's nod, he continued. "Those four elementals serve all the descendants of Slytherin. But you before they can serve you, you must first prove yourself to them."

"So you mean before they passed on to you, you had to prove yourself to them first?" Stephen propped his chin on his hands as he lay on the bed.

"Yes," Voldemort growled. "I will have the house elves here for your dinner. You are not allowed out of this room all week unless it is for your lessons. This is your punishment for sneaking about where you should not have been."

Stephen groaned loudly and flung a pillow at the door just as Voldemort shut it.

TBC

Sigh. Read and review. By the way guys, I'm thinking of giving Stephen companions... Probably in the later chapters. What d'you think?

Coming up: Voldemort's softie side (chicken soup and birthday presents)

Chapter Nine: Snippets - Of Chicken Soup and Flying

Several months later...

The Dark Lord was not in a good mood.

The only thing Voldemort lamented at the moment was that he could not kill off all of his Death Eaters because it would not do for him to simply wipe out all his followers. But he was going to ensure that they all went through a lot of pain. After his last torture session, er, pep talk with them he had certainly expected them to do better on raids and missions. Not only had the absolute morons not taken his words to heart, but they had - if it was at all possible - even grown weaker. The Dark Lord had just cast crucios on the whole lot of them and he was still feeling murderous. Even Nagini knew when to be quiet at a time like this.

It was not as if Voldemort was expecting them to take over the world or anything. Okay, so not yet. But surely a raid on the gathering of the Order of the Phoenix in the Hopkins' manor was not that impossible a task? Voldemort had taken most of his Inner Circle with him, to take another strike at killing the Eveleigh child who was there as well. Not only had he failed, but a good portion of his Death Eaters had been injured, three had been captured and to make matters worse the Light side had managed to take back Nicolas Flamel.

Voldemort blamed it all on Avery. If the idiot had not suggested bringing Flamel with them on that particular mission, the Light would not have taken him back. He would make sure Avery suffered for that.

So while the Dark Lord was sitting on his throne and busily plotting how to best torture his Death Eaters and cripple the Light, his four elementals were watching and arguing near him.

"I still think you should tell him, Gal," Aithinne pushed.

"Look at him! Master looks as though he's ready to eat anyone who approaches him. Including us," Gal hurriedly muttered.

"But out of the four of us, you're the one who's least likely to bungle things up," Braon added. "You're the one with the words and you know how to say them."

"I'm only doing it if you three are coming with me," Gal whispered back.

The other three shrugged. "Deal."

The four of them materialized out of thin air before Voldemort. The Dark Lord looked up with menacing red eyes. The elementals had to suppress the unconscious shiver of fear that threatened to rack their bodies. All four bowed and Gal stepped forward.

"Are you feeling particularly suicidal today?" Voldemort hissed.

"Master, something has, er, come up. It concerns young Stephen and I would not bother you if it were not important," Gal smoothly delivered.

If possible, Voldemort's bad mood multiplied tenfold. "What has the boy done now? Released a dozen nifflers in the manor? Destroyed an entire wing? Got bitten by a werewolf? Defected to the Light side? I would not put anything past that hellraiser."

"Er... no, master. Stephen is sick," Gal tried not to let his voice quaver.

Voldemort turned rigid. "Stephen is sick?" he whispered. "And what is he sick with, the plague, that it warrants your reporting it to me like this?"

"No, master. The flu."

Voldemort raised his blazing eyes and Gal and the other three elementals were bodily thrown back into a wall. "The boy is sick with the flu and that is incredibly important?! I give the four of you five seconds to get out of my sight or I will vaporize you where you stand!"

"No, master," Gal did not even hide the panic in his voice. "The house elves tried giving him medicine but he would not take it. They tried placing it in his food but he would not eat. He is in bed and steadily growing worse. We have tried to do all we could but, although sick, he is incredibly stubborn."

"Then why not ram the medicine down his stubborn throat?! Did you not think of that?!" Voldemort shouted.

The four elementals exchanged glances. "We, er, tried master. His power did not let us get any closer."

Voldemort abruptly stood up and clutched his wand in a way that meant someone would suffer and suffer dearly. He stood up and began to walk away. His elementals hesitated before following him. Voldemort pointed his wand at the fireplace and flames burst to life, lighting Stephen's bedroom. The house elves gathered near the boy's bed hastily bowed away, carrying the trays of food with them. The elementals hovered near the door, well away from the bed. The Dark Lord strode purposefully towards Stephen and glared disdainfully at him as he lay on the rumpled sheets.

The boy was pale as death. His eyes were closed and his breathing shallow. From where he was standing near the bedside, Voldemort could feel the heat that the boy's body emanated. Blearily, Stephen half opened his eyes. A slight smile crossed his lips before disappearing.

"Why are you not eating?" the iciness in Voldemort's tone caused a palpable drop in the temperature of the air surrounding him.

Stephen frowned. "Tha's not... food," he whispered hoarsely. "Poison... they'll poison me..."

Gal stepped forward. "For some strange reason, master, he seems to think the food is laced with poison and that it is meant to harm him."

Voldemort signaled one of the house elves to come forward, bringing with him a tray of food. He turned to Stephen. "Boy," he began in the

calmest tone he could summon up. "This food is not poisoned and you will eat it to get better and resume your training."

The house elf held the spoon to Stephen but the boy merely shook his head weakly and turned to one side of the bed. Voldemort's eyes flashed.

"Leave," he told the house elves. "Put the food on the table. That goes for the four of you as well," he softly told his elementals.

Braon couldn't help but feel worried as they exited Stephen's room. "Master looked murderous. You don't think he'll kill Stephen, do you?"

Scraithin snorted. "He won't kill the boy. Maybe just make him suffer a bit."

Voldemort looked down at the boy and for the first time in his life, he lost his patience. This was just the last straw! "Boy, I have had a very bad day that has just instilled within me how incompetent my Death Eaters really are. Unless you want to lose a limb I suggest you start eating right now!" He held out the bowl of soup to Stephen. "And I had better not hear another word about poison or else I myself will personally pour arsenic down your throat!!! Now eat!!!"

Stephen blinked at him and held out his hands but when Voldemort tried to put the bowl into his hands, the boy's hands shook and nearly spilled the soup on the bed covers. Voldemort felt like throwing the bowl at the wall. With a deep, disgusted sigh (and a silent promise that he would only do this now and on no other time), he lifted the spoon and held it to Stephen who opened his mouth and slurped it up.

"You should know," Voldemort began in a deceptively calm yet dangerous tone. "That if one word of this gets out, I will skin you alive and roast you for dinner."

Stephen nodded as he was fed another spoonful. He looked up at Voldemort and his smile made the Dark Lord cringe. "Thanks, Thran." Three years later...

"I trust you know what this is?" Scraithin asked Stephen as they were in another one of their lessons.

Stephen's face lit up when he saw what Scraithin had in hand. "Is that a broomstick? Are we going flying, Scray?"

Scraithin nodded. "Flying is an essential tool. Although it's far slower compared to Apparition, it comes in handy when there are Anti-Apparition wards about. Now, you stand beside the broomstick, hold out your hand and say up."

Stephen did as Scraithin asked and the broomstick zoomed up to his hand. "Cool! I've only ridden on a mini-broom, never on a real broom! This is so awesome!"

"This is for survival, not fun," Scraithin frowned. "Now, mount your broom like so..."

Everything else came naturally for Stephen. Even Scraithin was surprised by how fast the boy seemed to take everything in. He was obviously a natural. Even though the broom was old and slow and rickety, Stephen still came off as a superb flyer. What was more, Scraithin noticed that there was a passion in the boy's eyes when he was riding the broom. It was not the look of dark intensity that was so often in Stephen's eyes while training. This was... different. Flying was obviously something the boy already loved.

"Since you're so good at this, I think we can wrap this lesson up by next meeting," Scraithin gruffly told him. Stephen's face fell.

"I was hoping I could go flying all the time..." he muttered. "It was really so much fun."

Scraithin scrutinized the boy. He thought of saying something but deciding against it. "You're not here for fun," he gruffly told Stephen before sending him on his way.

Stephen nodded listlessly and left. He really, really wanted to go flying again. And on a better broom this time. Maybe a Cleansweep or a Comet. Much to Thran's utter disgust, Stephen was fascinated

by Quidditch, a sport he had read about in the library. He spent hours staring at the pictures of games in the pages. He wondered what it would be like to play the game.

Stephen pushed the door to his room open. On a table lay a blue, glowing book. It was a sort of organizer Thran had given him. It glowed blue whenever a significant event was imminent. Stephen frowned. He couldn't recall any event forthcoming. He picked up the book and opened it. There in neat, block letters was the word 'birthday'. Stephen blinked. He had meant to remove that but had somehow forgotten. Tomorrow was his birthday.

He snapped the book shut. Birthdays were insignificant to him now. He was just about to shove the book in a drawer when a thought occurred to him. A slow grin spread over Stephen's face. Maybe he could get that broom after all...

Stephen had just finished polishing off dessert when Thran strode into his bedroom, robes billowing behind him. Nagini followed close behind. Stephen hissed a hello at the snake who replied in kind. Stephen knew Thran was here to ask how his lessons had gone this week. He gave Thran a winning, innocent smile that immediately had the Dark Lord's eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"What do you want this time?" Voldemort asked.

"Nothing!" Stephen's face was a mask of complete innocence. Voldemort did not buy it for a second. He merely glared holes at Stephen until the boy gave in.

"Okay, okay! I was just thinking... training's a little tough, you know. And I wanted to start a, er, hobby of sorts, to help me deal with all the stress that comes with training," Stephen gave Voldemort his most charming smile. "Don't you think I deserve it?"

He most certainly did. At a little over six years old, Stephen was a fast learner. He was on par with most fourteen year olds in terms of knowledge. Voldemort would not say this to him of course. "What might this helpful hobby be?"

"Well, I thought maybe flying. It's a form of exercise right?"

Voldemort blinked. "There is one little flaw in that plan of yours, boy. You don't have a broom."

"I was hoping you could get me one!" Stephen exclaimed.

Voldemort stared at him for a full minute, not comprehending. "And why in Salazar's name would I do that?" he questioned menacingly.

"It's my birthday tomorrow!" Stephen cheerfully announced. "The way I see it, you owe me three years' worth of birthday gifts, don't you, Thran? A broomstick should cover those three years up nicely."

The Dark Lord closed his eyes, reining his temper in. He muttered a hex that Stephen easily dodged. Throwing the boy a dirty look, he slammed the door shut on his way out. Inside his bedroom, Stephen sighed. "So much for the broomstick..."

Three days later...

Voldemort looked the wizard up and down. The man, per his orders, had not been harmed by his Death Eaters. The fact that the man looked ready to keel over from fright at being held before the Dark Lord was a fact that Voldemort dismissed. He nodded to his Death Eaters.

"Good job, Crouch, Lestrangle, Malfoy. You may go now," he dismissed. They bowed and left.

He turned to the man. "Follow me, Mister Kenderson, if you value your life."

The Dark Lord led the chained man down a series of stairwells and corridors until they reached a room near the dungeons. Voldemort pushed the door open and motioned for the man to get inside. The man complied willingly. Voldemort stared at him impassively.

"You have everything you need here. If you need more materials, summon the house elves and they will give you what you need. You have a week to finish this task. I trust you will put your all into this or else I may change my mind about having to kill you," Voldemort

threatened and left the man inside the room, locking the door on his way out. Inside, the man went straight to work.
One week later...

The man looked strangely familiar. Stephen frowned. He couldn't concentrate on his lessons. He had seen a man, one of Thran's prisoners last week and Stephen couldn't shake off the feeling that the man was very familiar and that he really ought to know him. Thran had called the man Kenderson. Kenderson... Kenderson... Where had Stephen heard that name before?

He sighed and tried unsuccessfully to purge his mind of all thoughts of Kenderson. Aithinne had not been pleased with his performance today. The fire elemental was teaching him to cast the Imperius curse. They were starting on spiders and Stephen's mind had been wandering all day. Needless to say, he was lucky Aithinne had not burned him because of his utter incompetence with that lesson.

Stephen pushed open the door to his bedroom, feeling a headache coming along. He turned to his bed only to see a long, thin package wrapped in brown paper lying there. His heartbeat quickened and he ran over to his bed. This could not be what he thought it was... could it? Excitement began to well up within him as he ripped the paper off the package.

And lying there gleaming in its magnificence on his bed was a brand new broomstick. Stephen's jaw dropped. It was far superior than any model he had ever seen. Reverently, he turned the broomstick over. Near it's handle, in spiky writing was the name of the broom. Nebula.

It was then that it hit Stephen where he had heard of the name Kenderson. He ran over to the book that was lying propped open on his desk. He riffled the pages and sure enough there it was. Aldritch Kenderson was renowned for being one of the finest broom manufacturers in the entire world. The man was retired now, but it was rumored that he was still working on something called a Nimbus line in his townhouse in London.

Thran's kidnapping of Kenderson and the brand new Nebula lying on his bed clicked in Stephen's mind. He grinned and vowed that from

then on, he would work thrice as hard on his lessons. To prove that he really was that worthy.

TBC

I want a Nebula. And I am going to put in some new companions for Stephen. Sorry, part of the plot. I'll do my best to make them interesting though. Not in the chapter yet. Read and review!

Coming up: final exams

Chapter Ten: Final Exam

Stephen gave a loud whoop and smirked as the Conjunctivitus Curse hit the Common Welsh Green smack in the eyes. The dragon roared in anger and agony as it halted in mid-air and clutched its eyes. Stephen pocketed his wand and left the dragon with his pain. He clutched his Nebula and sped away from the beast.

It was only his second day and the dragon had been a bit of a shock. Stephen had been leading it on a merry chase for the past three hours, frantically trying to think of a spell that would allow him to defeat it. The Conjunctivitus Curse was the best one he could think of.

This had been his teachers' idea of a final exam. At nearly nine years old, the four elementals had taught Stephen all they could teach on wizardry. Soon, it would be Thran himself who would become the young boy's teacher. Before that happened though, Aithinne, Gal, Scraithin and Braon had fashioned something of a final test for him. They had locked him up in a corridor telling him that all he had to do to get back was to find the golden door.

If he passed this test, he was learned enough to receive instruction from Thran. Stephen didn't even want to think of what would happen if he did not pass. He had to.

Angling his broom, he dived into the forest below. For some strange reason, a door had opened and led him into this forest. Now Merlin only knew how long he was going to stay here. The elementals had not said anything about how long this exam was going to take. Knowing them, it could take months or perhaps even a year.

He landed then muttered a shrinking charm, pocketing his precious Nebula. Stephen frowned, looking around. He could not tell what had made him land in the midst of this clearing. But instinct – a trait born from Gal and honed by Aithinne – prevailed and told him that here was where he should be.

Ever cautious, Stephen tentatively began walking. He had not walked far when he came across a man sprawled as though dead in the middle of the clearing. The young boy ran over to him. The man was

lying facedown on the ground and when Stephen turned him over, he grimaced at what he saw.

Frozen features, grayish skin. The man had obviously been Petrified. That was when Stephen saw the other materials that surrounded the man. There was a cauldron, a small table laden with ingredients, and a few potted plants. Realizing Braon's handywork in this, he stepped to the table. There was a note there, along with the ingredients. Stephen's eyes widened as he skimmed over the note. It stated that the Petrified man had the password that would take him out of the forest. But he had to un-Petrify the man first with a Mandrake Restorative Draught.

"WHAT?!" he yelped. "But a Mandrake Restorative Draught takes months to make!!! Isn't there any other way to make this guy conscious again?!"

As expected, silence answered him. He spewed off a string of expletives but soon, additional writing appeared under the note. Follow these instructions, young Stephen, they will shorten the length of time needed for you to brew the potion. Underneath that were additional instructions for the draught. Biting back a sigh of frustration, Stephen muttered, "Incendium," and a fire merrily burned under the cauldron.

Still grumbling, he placed a pair of black earmuffs over his ears as he started to pull the Mandrakes from the pots.

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"Move over, Francis!"

"Come on, Ron, I got here first!"

"Well share some, will you mate?"

"Some? I can barely see as it is!"

A quiet scuffle broke out between the nine year olds, stopping only when they heard the gravelly, old voice speak again. At once, Ron

and Francis stopped squabbling over who got to peek in through the keyhole and crouched low, both deciding finally to share. The two technically weren't supposed to be there but they were playing one of their adventure games when they saw Professor Dumbledore and another old man entering a room. Curiosity spurred the two friends to follow so now they were eavesdropping through a keyhole on a conversation that was obviously supposed to be private.

They pressed closer to the door, straining to hear. Professor Dumbledore was speaking.

Francis frowned. "He said the other guy's name. I couldn't catch it. Could you hear?"

Ron scrunched his face up. "Yeah. He called the other old bloke Nicolas. Nicolas Flamel."
Elsewhere...

"Oh bloody hell!" Stephen cursed as he landed on a warm patch of greenery.

He had finally finished the Mandrake Restorative Draught although he had no idea how much time had elapsed since then. He had stopped keeping track of the days after one month of brewing the potion had gone by. He had finally fed it to the Petrified man, along with a small dosage of Veritaserum that he had brewed alongside the Restorative Draught. After grilling the man, Stephen had extracted the password from him and it had led him into a cave that then conveniently dumped him here.

Wherever the hell 'here' was. Struggling to his feet, Stephen got up and looked around. It was a sort of swamp. Not unlike the swamps Scraithin used to take him to. He felt something cool and slithery groping across his legs and he looked down with a frown. A thick vine-like plant was wrapping itself around his legs. Devil's Snare.

Slightly annoyed, Stephen pointed to the slippery thing and muttered a spell. Sunlight shone for a moment, bright and warm from his wand, and the Devil's Snare hurriedly released Stephen from its grip. The young boy looked around.

Near the middle of the swamp he saw a small island. A faint bluish glow emanated from the middle of the island and Stephen assumed that glow was where he should go. There was a small rowboat tucked away in one corner and Stephen walked towards it. He stared at it skeptically. It looked like it would fall apart at any second. But some instinct told him it was the only way to get to the island.

Carefully, Stephen pushed the rowboat to the water and got on. There was a single, battered oar inside and he muttered curses as he saw it. The rowboat swayed precariously in the water. Stephen tried to steady it and succeeded after a couple of minutes. Slowly, he rowed towards the island, the gentle splashing of water the only sound to be heard. It was eerie, this silence. It was like the silence back at the manor, only his lessons with Scraithin had taught him the value of sound.

Nature is always alive, always teeming with its own voices. If those voices fall silent, beware, Stephen heard the earth elemental's words in his mind again.

He was halfway through the swamp when something struck the side of his rowboat. The already sorry-looking thing swayed violently and Stephen swore he could hear the sound of wood splintering.

"Wonderful," he muttered and whipped out his wand but before he could cast a spell, another something hit the side of the rowboat again and this time upturned it, throwing Stephen, clothes and all, headfirst into the murky swamp water.

He struggled for a moment, but then hours upon hours of swimming lessons with Scraithin ("I suppose you could always learn faster if I just dropped you in the middle of the ocean and waited for you to swim back to shore, young Stephen") soon kicked in and he gracefully surfaced grimacing at the swamp water that now covered his entire body. He was near enough to the island. Stephen figured he could swim the rest of the way.

He had barely taken one stroke before something gripped his leg and prevented him from going further. What now? Stephen grumbled in

his mind as he twisted underwater at whatever had hold of his leg. The face of a grindylow looked back at him, it's long fingers wrapped around his leg, intent on not letting go. He pointed his wand at the creature.

“Relashio!” The jet of red light left an angry burn on the grindylow’s skin and it screeched horribly before diving down to the waters. Stephen smirked.

He continued swimming to the island and was grateful when his feet finally managed to touch dry land. He performed a drying spell on himself and surveyed the small piece of land in the midst of the swamp. A blanket was spread out in the center and there were numerous potion bottles lying around it. Braon’s work no doubt. There was a glowing blue piece of paper along with the potion bottles. Stephen started to approach it when suddenly everything went cold.

Dark memories, painful memories crowded into his thoughts. Wycksworth... his parents... Stephen felt himself tremble as his surroundings started to turn hazy. A tall, dark shape was slowly floating towards him. He gritted his teeth, furiously blinked his eyes and directed his wand at the black shape.

“Expecto Patronum!” A silver panther erupted from Stephen’s wand and leapt out towards the form of the dementor. The dementor raised its rotting hand and floated quickly away from the boy. The panther ran back towards Stephen and vanished just before reaching him. Stephen smirked. He didn’t particularly like dementors even though they were Thran’s allies and made it a point to stay as far away from them as possible. The Patronus Charm wasn’t exactly one of his favorites either but Aithinne had insisted he learn it, much to his displeasure.

He spun around, alert for anything else that could be there. Stephen muttered a spell and the air around him glowed for a brief moment. When the glow dissipated, Stephen felt certain that there was no entity of any danger to him around there. He went to the blanket and quickly scanned the note.

It stated quite concisely that among the various potion bottles, one would take him to the next stage of his exam. Brilliant. Stephen frowned at the bottles. There were about fifteen of them there. Sighing, he got to work.

He unscrewed the first bottle. Clear, liquid, almost like water. Veritaserum. He unscrewed the second one. The second one was full of some thick, glutinous substance. Polyjuice Potion. He examined the potions one by one, looking closely at them, smelling them and occasionally even touching them. Stephen had comfortably settled himself on the ground and was methodically separating the potions that he was familiar with. Soon enough, only two vials of unknown potion remained in front of him. He frowned. He was sure he hadn't brewed either one of them yet. He concentrated.

Dimly, he remembered the other potion. It was in a cauldron Braon had been stirring sometime during their fifth class. What had she called it again...?

His eyes snapped open as he remembered, grinning. He unscrewed the cap on the vial of one of the two and quickly drank it. The other vial of potion, he pocketed. After all, he could probably use a little Felix Felicis some day. He shut his eyes as the potion kicked in and the world seemed to revolve around him.

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Francis shrugged. He didn't know any Nicolas Flamel. But the conversation between Mr. Dumbledore and Mr. Flamel was beginning to sound interesting.

"Nicolas, are you certain you are ready to talk about it?" Albus gently questioned as he poured tea into their cups.

Nicolas, who had been looking off into space, gave a ghost of a smile. "I have to let it out Albus. Never in all my years... it was the most horrible experience in my entire lifetime," he finished with a whispered anguish.

Dumbledore silently sipped his tea, waiting for Nicolas to continue. The other wizard drew a ragged breath and went on. "Pain. That is all

I remember. He tortured me with every waking minute, Albus. And you would have thought that being tortured for so long, the pain would start to numb. But no, it never did... every moment it would grow worse and worse until... Oh gods, until I even prayed for the moment when he would lift the curse to put me under the Imperius just so the pain would stop. Just thinking about it..."

Francis and Ron shuddered at the raw suffering in Nicolas Flamel's old voice. Francis thought back and remembered now. "Flamel! I remember, Ron!" he whispered.

"What, mate?"

"Nicolas Flamel. Dad said something about him being captured by Death Eaters and used by the Dark Lord!"

Ron's eyes widened and he resumed listening to the keyhole avidly.

"I remember... there were brief respites from the pain but they only seemed to make the next wave worse. There was something though..." Flamel broke off with a thoughtful frown.

"Something what, Nicolas?"

"It could probably have been a hallucination but it struck me because it was so out of place in that entire hellish experience." Flamel looked Dumbledore in the eye. "I thought I saw the Dark Lord talking to a boy. A little boy, probably not much older than the Eveleigh child..."

They both quieted down. Nicolas laughed humorlessly. "It must have been my imagination, Albus. Forget I mentioned it."

But the glint in Dumbledore's eyes said he did not.
Elsewhere

Stephen was exhausted. He was in the middle of an elaborate labyrinth and he had been going round in circles for hours. He had entered the labyrinth knowing that the exit was on the other side. All

he had to do was to continue heading north. But this maze had been built for the sole purpose of getting lost in. And lost was exactly where he found himself right now.

He would have tried a spell if he could. He had learned lots of handy ones that could point directions but strangely enough his wand refused to work once inside the labyrinth. Stephen scowled. Probably Gal's doing. He had to find a way to get out of this labyrinth. What to do?

He took a minute and calmed himself. It was one of the short semi-meditation techniques Gal taught him. Already he could feel his 'tingle' simmering under his skin and knew that if he didn't calm down it would break out again. The last time that had happened, he was training with Aithinne and the fire elemental had looked equal parts astonished and scared at his 'tingle'.

Stephen thought. When you don't know what to do, survey your surroundings. What tools are there to use? He looked around. None obviously. And then he looked up. The night sky shone bright and clear. Stephen could even pick out a few constellations here and there. Constellations... that was it!

He grinned. He hadn't suffered all those Astronomy lessons under Scraithin for nothing then! He could get his bearings using the stars! Quickly, Stephen got to work. Within minutes, he had figured out where he was and how to proceed north. He ran along the labyrinth, constantly consulting the starry heavens once in a while.

After two hours, he laughed out loud when he saw that he had finally reached the end of the labyrinth. He wondered what other obstacles his instructors had in mind for him. A surge of confidence welled up within him as he exited the labyrinth.

Whatever they were, he knew that he could face them and win. Gal was staring off into space with an utterly blank expression. Braon was sitting regally on a chair nearby and shuffling her tarot cards in an agitated manner. Scraithin, gruff as usual, was feeding a particularly savage baby manticore while Aithinne was pacing to and fro. Lord Voldemort gritted his teeth. His elementals were in a state of

high anxiety, although they tried their best to hide it from him. Even Nagini was curling and uncurling herself on the floor every once in a while. Voldemort would have already snapped at them to stop it but he knew it wouldn't change anything. They would merely bow and say yes and then resume whatever it was that they were doing. And to think it was all because of the boy.

Stephen was scheduled to finish his final exam today and they were awaiting him outside the golden door. Although they didn't show it, the Dark Lord knew his elementals were apprehensive about whether or not Stephen could safely finish the exam. Although all but Braon vehemently denied it, Voldemort knew they had become fond of Stephen as well. Which was why they had hesitated on giving him this particularly grueling final exam but Voldemort had put his foot down.

The Dark Lord had no doubts about Stephen. Voldemort knew he was ready. The boy had already gained an exquisite control over his tingle, his Darkness power. Oh yes. He was more than ready to start receiving instruction from Voldemort now.

-Massssssster...- Nagini hissed. Voldemort inclined his head to her. - You are not... concerned about the boy? He issss late... what if he hassss gotten into trouble?-

-That boy issss more than capable of finishing thissss examination- Voldemort coldly hissed back. -I do not underssstand what reason there is for worry.-

Nagini stared at the Dark Lord, astonished that Voldemort had such confidence in the boy. But before he could reply further, the golden door was pushed open. Gal jerked into motion, Braon dropped her cards, Scraithin ignored the mantichore and Aithinne stopped in his tracks.

Slowly, the silhouette against the door walked forward. It was Stephen. His clothes were ragged, covered in blood, slime and mud. One hand clutched his wand while the other held a long sword. His eyes were sharp and intense. He stood there like that for a moment

while the Dark Lord, the elementals and Nagini stayed stock staring at him. Then his face broke into a wide grin

“I told you I could do it,” he smirked.

Gal, Braon and Aithinne rushed over and congratulated him. Scraithin grunted but went over to them all the same. Even Nagini was hissing her congratulations to the young boy. Stephen happily basked in the attention, glad to be back in the manor at last. Then his eyes found Thran's.

There was satisfaction in Voldemort's usually inscrutable red eyes. And if you looked close enough, a hint of pride. He turned away with a swish of his robes, but not before Stephen saw the small, barely-there smile on the Dark Lord's face.

Stephen knew he had done well.

TBC

Just a note about Stephen's Nebula. In terms of how good it is, let's just say it would bring even a Firebolt to shame. Read and review!

Coming up: new companions

Chapter Eleven: Marric and Melandra

They were in a large, airy room in the manor. All the furniture had been pushed to the side and Stephen and the Dark Lord stood in the center. Stephen's expressionless mask concealed his nervousness. It was three days after his final exams. Thran had given him that amount of time to be rested and now here he was ready to be taught by Thran. It was just the two of them for not even Nagini was present. The Dark Lord looked Stephen over before speaking.

"All right, boy. For the past years you have been learning how to keep that power of yours, your tingle, under control. Now, I will be teaching you to use it." Calmly, the Dark Lord began telling Stephen what he knew of Stephen's powers. What Gal had told him long ago. The boy's expression did not change and only the slightest glimmer in his green eyes indicated his surprise at the news.

"So you're saying that my tingle is a power called the Darkness and it allows me to destroy anything at all?" the incredulity slipped out of the young boy's voice.

"Yes, precisely," Voldemort nodded. "And it is this Darkness that you will attempt to learn how to use."

A bright smile broke the boy's stoic visage. "Will you be teaching me how, Thran?"

Voldemort clenched his hands. He could never get over how the boy's face could suddenly shift from having no expression at all to that of a cheerful child's. It was unnerving.

"Yes. That is what I will be teaching you," Voldemort rolled back the long black sleeves of his robes. "During your first few lessons, Gal taught you some shield spells didn't he? Ones that would barrier your magic, more specifically your tingle, and prevent it from leaking." Stephen nodded. "Do you know what those spells feel like?"

"Er... feel like?"

“When you probe the magic inside you, can you tell the difference between those shield spells and your own magic power?” Thran added impatiently.

“Yeah, actually.”

“All right. What we’re going to be doing today is assessing the strength of your Darkness,” Thran explained. “Each wizard is born with his or her magic bound by multiple naturally-formed barriers. Without these barriers, our magic would go haywire all the time – we could never control it. Whenever a wizard casts a spell, one of these barriers temporarily open to release a stream of magic for the wizard to use in the spell, and the barrier shuts again. Do you understand so far?”

Stephen nodded cheerfully. “Yes, I get it. But what does this have to do with my shield spells?”

“These naturally-formed barriers are stronger versions of the shield spells you use. The first thing I want you to do is to deactivate the shield spells you have on you right now.”

Stephen’s eyes widened. “Deactivate my spells? But what if – “

“Your Darkness will not go awry, boy,” Voldemort interrupted. “I have noticed it only goes out of control when you are under a particular kind of stress. Now do it.”

Stephen remained motionless for a while. Then he raised his wand and muttered the incantations. A gray light glowed around him and dissipated. The young boy frowned. He felt strange without his shield spells. Almost naked somehow.

“Good,” Thran intoned. “Now, go into your magic and search for just one barrier. Then I want you to take that barrier down.”

“Take it down?” Stephen repeated faintly. “What if something happens?”

Voldemort rolled his eyes. “Nothing will happen. If something does, I am quite capable of taking care of it. Hurry, I haven’t all day.”

Stephen hesitated but then complied. He closed his eyes and evened out his breathing. Gal had taught him that his magic core could be accessed through meditation. He took in a long breath then let it out. Took it in again and let it out. This pattern followed until he was deep in his meditative state. In his mind, Stephen quickly found his magic core. He had gone there before in lessons with Gal so he knew what it was like. Frowning, he searched for one barrier to take down like Thran told him to. He ran his hands along the outside of his magic core, feeling the barely restrained throb of his power. The barriers were doing their job well. Pity he would have to take one down. He found one barrier and proceeded to take it out.

Voldemort stood patiently watching the boy who was in a meditative trance. He knew Stephen had reached his magic core now. It was merely a matter of waiting. He did not have to wait long. Pretty soon, Stephen’s entire body became suffused with a black glow that Voldemort knew to be his Darkness.

The Dark Lord frowned. Had Stephen taken out just one barrier? By the strength of this magic, it felt like he had taken down all. Voldemort did not want to admit it but he had never felt a power this strong before. Perhaps he had underestimated the boy’s Darkness.

He felt the magic flooding the room, flooding the very air and permeating into everything. Stephen remained motionless and standing, lit in black. A wind as strong as a tornado picked up in the room whirling everything every which way, slashing across the room.

“Patrocinium”, Voldemort muttered the spell and raised a shield just in time.

Stephen’s power continued to grow in magnitude. Voldemort felt the utter Darkness that lay within the power. It derived its strength from malice, greed, hatred, wrath, envy, all that was dark. A smile twisted in Voldemort’s pale face. The boy’s power was perfect.

The Darkness was twisting around and around the room. The only thing that Voldemort could see now was the boy. He felt the Darkness pressing in, felt his shield start to give. The Dark Lord gritted his teeth, pointed his wand at Stephen and cast the spell. Before it could hit the young boy, it was vaporized by the boy's power. He cast again and again only to have it end in the same way. Voldemort scowled. He had to get closer. But his shield would give in any time. Strengthening the shield, step by step he went closer to the boy.

"Renovare Carmen," he shouted and the spell managed to hit Stephen just as the Dark Lord's shield gave way. Instantly, the Darkness stopped.

Stephen blinked his eyes open and his jaw dropped in shock. The room looked like it had been through every natural disaster known to humankind. All the furniture was in ruins, the walls were starting to crumble, a jagged crack split the floor in half and Thran standing near him had his robes in tatters. Despite the fact that he was wearing little more than rags, Stephen noticed the expression on Voldemort's face. It was a happily victorious one.

"Thran?" Stephen asked.

There was a glint in Voldemort's eyes. "You are even more powerful than I dared imagine. How are you feeling?"

Stephen frowned. "Tired. Exhausted."

Voldemort nodded unconcernedly. "Common side effect. This is enough for today. Go and rest. I will have Braon along with a potion that will help revive you."

Before anything more could be said, the doors opened and Nagini slithered in. She stopped dead at the sight of the destroyed room and stared incredulously at Stephen and Voldemort.

-What issss it, Nagini?- Voldemort lazily asked as he spelled his ragged robes into brand new ones again.

-Masssster... Malfoy, Lesssstrange, Ssssnape, Nott, Rosier and Avery are here. They have newssss for you- the snake replied. Voldemort frowned. What was wrong now?

He nodded to Stephen who grinned and walked back to his rooms. Following Nagini, he went out to meet with his Death Eaters.

“ – can tell you one thing, Master will not be pleased!” the shrill voice of Bellatrix Lestrange echoed throughout the circular room.

Snape glared contemptuously at her. “What would you have done, Bella? Left them there for the Light to find? They saw us. They saw our faces! Master would be even less pleased if he knew that we left them there!”

“I am not saying we should have done nothing, Severus,” Bella sniped. “All I am saying is that we should not have brought them here!”

“Severus, Bella, that is enough,” Lucius reprimanded sharply. “What’s done is done and all of us are to blame.”

“Well I for one will make sure the Dark Lord knows that I was very much against this whole thing!” Bella proclaimed.

“Very much against what whole thing?” a chill voice drifted to them.

The six Death Eaters turned and prostrated themselves to Voldemort. Each crawled in his turn and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord’s robes.

Lord Voldemort stood gazing at them, letting the silence build up until he noticed them squirming slightly in discomfort in front of him. “What has happened this time, Death Eaters?” he asked in a quietly dangerous voice.

There was silence for a while. Then Rosier spoke up, “My Lord, it has to do with that new recruit, Corvin.”

“What about him?” Voldemort hissed.

“He... he turned traitor on us, my Lord. The turncoat knew that some of our people undercover in the Ministry would be meeting today. He told this to the Order of the Phoenix, along with the place where the meeting was being held. They Ministry naturally ambushed our... companions. They managed to raise the alarm but it was too late by the time we got there.”

Voldemort thought. Yes, there was a meeting. It had been held in Zephyn's manor. He remembered placing Crouch in charge, thinking the young man had earned it at last. Barty Crouch, Jr. had been ecstatic at the opportunity.

“They were all captured?” Voldemort's voice was an emotionless monotone.

“Half of them, my Lord,” Malfoy silkily supplied. “The other half that were not were badly wounded and are now being treated by my Lord's Healers.”

“Names, Malfoy!” Voldemort snapped.

“Of course, my Lord!” Lucius Malfoy choked. “Those who were captured were Williamson, Seinfeld, Brennan, Emory and Crouch. Zephyn, Callahan and Delaney died in the ambush.”

“And where is the traitor now?”

“Corvin is with the Ministry now, my Lord. They are honoring him for the capture of the other Death Eaters,” Snape replied.

Voldemort fell into quiet. His eyes lingered on each one of the Death Eaters bowing before him. Then his spine went rigid.

“Who is there?” he asked in a menacing tone, rounding on the Death Eaters. “Who have you brought with you?!”

The faces of all six Death Eaters paled. It was Severus Snape who turned around and made a motion with his hand. From the shadows of one of the pillars, two small figures emerged. They were children,

Voldemort was stunned to see. He looked them over with a critical eye.

A boy and a girl. They were twins. The boy's hair was a deeper chestnut while the girl's was auburn with brilliant highlights yet both their eyes were tawny amber. Voldemort realized they were the same age as Stephen. Their expressions were fearful as they hurried and, imitating the other Death Eaters, also bowed down before him.

"I repeat," the edge in the Dark Lord's voice chilled the room. "Who. Are. These. Children."

"M-my Lord, they are Zephyn's twins, Marric and Melandra. They were in the manor at the time of the ambush. We barely managed to get them out," Avery trembled.

"And what exactly are they doing here? Do you not realize that this place is held in the highest secrecy and you brought two brats back with you? Crucio!" Avery fell to the ground writhing and screaming in pain. The boy and girl stared horrified at the twitching, agonized figure of the man being tortured.

Voldemort pointed his wand at each one of his Death Eaters and cast the Cruciatus on them in turn. The boy and girl were clutching each other, both terrified out of their wits. Voldemort turned to them menacingly. Surprisingly enough, they did not cower or whimper but met his look with determined albeit scared expressions. The Dark Lord held back the Cruciatus he would have cast on them and observed them with a speculative eye.

Five minutes later he lifted the Cruciatus on his Death Eaters. They were shaking from the pain. He glared coldly at them.

"Nott, Avery leave," he ordered. As the two scurried away, he cast his concentration on the remaining four. "I give to the four of you the task of purging the Death Eater ranks from spies that the Order and Ministry may have planted. If there turns out to be another spy or another person who turns traitor among the Death Eaters, I hold the four of you personally responsible. Am I understood?"

“Understood, my Lord,” the four of them murmured.

“Now to take care of these two brats,” Voldemort said silkily.

“Take care, my Lord?” Snape ventured to ask.

“Yes, Severus. Surely you realize that they cannot be allowed to live. They know our headquarters, your identities. They have seen too much and heard too much. The manticores are hungry. They would make a nice snack,” Voldemort told them.

“Surely my Lord, we could obliviate them and they would be none the wiser,” Snape hurriedly interjected.

Voldemort laughed coldly. “There are spells that can break even the strongest memory charm, Severus. I myself know how. I wouldn’t put it past Dumbledore not to know. These two must die.”

“But my Lord – “ Voldemort’s eyes flashed and whatever else Snape would’ve wanted to say died in his throat.

“Do you wish to join them too, Severus?” Voldemort asked softly.

Snape’s normally pasty expression turned vampire-pale. “N-no... my Lord...”

“Very well then. Wait here. You two. Boy, girl follow me,” the Dark Lord commanded as he exited out the door.

“Is he going to kill us?” Melandra Zephyn whispered to her brother as they walked behind the Dark Lord’s billowing robes.

Marric Zephyn didn’t reply but the look he gave his sister was enough of an answer. They both knew who Lord Voldemort was of course. At home, father always kept saying that when they grew up, they would be privileged to serve under the great Lord Voldemort, too. It hadn’t mattered to Marric and Melandra very much back then. But now with the threat of death imminent it did.

“I thought father wanted us to serve under the Dark Lord,” Melandra whispered again. “Why does the Dark Lord want to kill us?”

Marric sighed. “Cause we saw and heard something we weren’t supposed to.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“Father says to serve under the Dark Lord is the greatest honor. How much greater do you think it would be if we were to die under him?” Marric hissed at her but in his heart, he agreed with his sister. He did not want to die.

Voldemort was about to descend a staircase when a voice spoke up, “Don’t kill them.”

The Dark Lord, Marric and Melandra turned. From the shadows of the hallway, a figure emerged. Marric and Melandra stared. It was a boy about their age. He was wearing the black robes everyone in here wore. The boy had messy jet-black hair and green eyes that appraised the twins coolly.

“Did I not order you to your room?” the Dark Lord’s voice was so cold a chill ran down Marric’s spine.

The other boy merely grinned as though it didn’t affect him. “Braon’s potion worked. I’m feeling a lot better,” then his face resumed the serious expression. “Don’t kill them, Thran.”

Thran? Marric and Melandra exchanged a confused look. Who was this boy? And how dare he address the Dark Lord in so familiar a manner?

“Don’t presume to order me around, boy,” the Dark Lord snapped. “They are of no use to me anymore. They know too much and that is dangerous. They must be killed.”

“Why don’t you just take them in?” the boy suggested. “You know, like you did with me.”

Green light sparked from the Dark Lord's wand but he held himself. "This is not an orphanage. You at least had something to offer me. Your powers. They are merely sniveling brats who are worth nothing."

"How do you know?" the boy challenged. "I used to think of myself as a sniveling brat who was worth nothing. You'll never know unless you try. And besides, if you train them now then they'll be even more powerful when they grow up, right?"

"Wrong," the Dark Lord calmly disagreed. "And I already have my hands full training you."

"Well then Aithinne, Gal, Scraithin and Braon could do it!" the boy exclaimed. "They could be, I don't know... sort of elite Death Eaters! Merlin knows you need better ones anyway."

Voldemort ignored the insult. "My elementals would never consent to this of their own free will. And contrary to your opinion, I do not need elite Death Eaters."

The boy frowned and played out his trump card. "But it gets kind of lonely here without anyone my age... Come on, Thran. Please?"

Voldemort struggled for a moment, then his red eyes flashed. "No. And that is final."

When the Dark Lord returned without the Zephyn children, Snape's stomach turned as he tried not to imagine what their fate must have been. Manticores were savage and vicious. Even though they were Death Eaters' children, they still deserved to live.

Bella Lestrangle and Rosier did not say anything. Lucius Malfoy paled a bit at the thought of his own son Draco being in those children's place.

The Dark Lord discussed their new mission some more with them and then dismissed them. Snape immediately apparated to the Eveleigh manor where the current meeting of the Order of the

Phoenix was being held. His mouth was taut and his expression grim as he entered the manor.

“Snivellus!” a loud voice called out. Sirius Black smirked as he approached Snape. “How was your meeting with your master? Enjoyed yourself?”

Instead of snarling back or hexing Black, Snape just walked past him. Sirius frowned, unused to being ignored. He noticed that Snape’s expression was sallow than usual and there was a haunted look to his eyes.

“Something wrong, mate?” James Potter asked as he approached Sirius.

“Nothing serious, Prongs,” Sirius replied as they entered the room where the Order members were gathered. Sirius saw Snape talking to Dumbledore and he could have sworn the greasy-haired git looked sorrowful for a second.

“Must’ve been a trick of the light,” Sirius muttered.

“Well?” Voldemort demanded as Stephen walked into his study with a smug look.

“They agreed,” the young boy told him. “All of them. Told you they would.”

Voldemort stared at him incredulously for a second. “What in Salazar’s name did you do to make them agree? Blackmail them?”

Stephen shrugged. “Something like that. Wasn’t hard really.” It actually was that hard especially when it had come to convincing Scraithin and Aithinne but Stephen wasn’t going to admit that.

Voldemort shook his head. Stephen was full of surprises today. “When do they want to start?”

“They’ll start teaching them next week,” Stephen told the Dark Lord. He paused, searching for the right words. “Why’d you do it, Thran?”

“I thought this was what you wanted,” Voldemort replied acidly.

“It is what I want but I know you didn’t do it just because I wanted it,” Stephen defended. “What made you decide not to kill them?”

The boy was being extremely bothersome today. In all reality, Voldemort didn’t know why he had decided not to kill the Zephyn children in the end. So he just shook his head.

“I have no idea. But they had better prove themselves useful around here,” Voldemort muttered.

“They will be especially with Gal, Scraithin, Aithinne and Braon training them!” Stephen enthused.

“How you actually got those four to agree to train those two brats is beyond me,” the Dark Lord expressed. “Now leave. I have work to do.”

Stephen said goodbye and went to find Marric and Melandra.

TBC

Read and review, guys, cause I really want to know what you think of Marric and Mela. Initial views etc. Actually, I wasn't planning to update till my birthday but looking at my schedule, my birthday's smack dab between our exam in chem 26.1 and midterms in math so... I am in deep crap.

Coming up: growing up together

Chapter Twelve: Loyalty

Marric studied the room. It was every bit as grand as their home had been. He grimaced. Well, the Zephyn Manor wasn't their home now. Father was dead and mother had been dead since they were born. Only a long procession of nannies (who never stayed long anyway) had taken care of him and his sister. And now through a twist of circumstance they had ended up here in the very midst of the Dark Order. Marric still felt dazed. Everything was happening too fast.

"Like your new room?"

Marric spun around. The strange boy with the glittering green eyes was behind him. It unnerved Marric. He hadn't even heard the boy coming in.

The other boy looked around. "My name's Stephen, by the way. Stephen Gaunt," he added nonchalantly. "What's yours?"

Marric refused to speak. He felt wary around this other boy. When Stephen Gaunt realized Marric wasn't going to talk to him, he smiled coldly and looked Marric in the eye. All of a sudden, a flood of memories came unbidden to Marric's mind. His and Mela's birthday last year... vacations with Aunt Trudice (whom they hated)... Father punishing them for speaking to Muggle children they had seen on the street... riding his broomstick... The memories stopped.

Marric gaped at the other boy whose smile was less cold and more self-satisfied. "Marric Zephyn, hm?" Stephen Gaunt asked, cheerfully. He noted Marric's shocked expression and sighed. "It's called Legilimency. It's kind of like entering another person's mind. I've wanted to try it out for a long time but Thran and the elementals are no fun since their minds are always blocked. You'll learn it, too. Aithinne'll teach you."

Marric scowled. He did not like his mind being intruded upon. Stephen sighed again. "You know, you could be a bit nicer to me. I did save your life after all."

Marric blinked. In the excitement of everything, he had forgotten. He owed this boy Stephen his life. "Why did you do it?" he questioned, speaking for the first time.

Stephen shrugged. "You didn't look like you wanted to die," then his bright eyes darkened. "They never asked me if I wanted to die for Francis either..."

"What?" the boy Stephen made no sense.

"Huh? Oh, nothing. Anyway, just because you're allowed to live doesn't get you off the hook. You'll study here. Thran told me to tell you your lessons start in one week," Stephen explained plopping himself on Marric's bed.

"Lessons? And who's Thran?" Marric's head was starting to spin.

Stephen laughed. "Sorry. Thran is what I call Lord Voldemort. And yes you heard right. Lessons. You'll be studying magic under Thran's elementals, like I did. They'll teach you a lot of really cool things!"

Stephen chatted on and Marric allowed him. This boy had just saved his and Mela's life. For that, Marric would be eternally grateful.

Mela came in soon after and Marric introduced his twin to Stephen. Like her brother, Mela was wary of Stephen at first but an hour later, they were talking animatedly. Marric smiled a bit. Maybe this new life wouldn't be so bad.

Months later...

"Lorum Ignis!" Stephen cried out but the only thing that came out was a wisp of smoke. He smiled sheepishly as Thran glared at him.

"You were doing the wand movement wrong," the Dark Lord drawled out. "Here. Follow me." He demonstrated the correct wand movement and Stephen tried to imitate it again. "Not like that, boy! You're waving your wand too much, you look like you're flailing about! Now stop mutilating the spell and do it correctly this time!"

In addition to teaching Stephen how to use his Darkness (the Dark Lord was very pleased with the progress they were making with that), Voldemort was also teaching him his wide repertoire of dark curses and spells. The boy learned fast and furthermore managed to retain the spells in his memory.

Today, Voldemort was teaching him the Elemental Whips Spell. It was one that had been personally invented by Gal and that the Dark Lord himself had only ever used against Albus Dumbledore. It was very powerful. Basically, it was creating a whip out of any of the four elements and if the wizard chose to, he could change the whip into another element at any time. But it required a huge amount of magic and was very draining. Stephen had still been unable to perform the spell to Voldemort's satisfaction.

The Dark Lord frowned as Stephen's next attempt again ended in futility. "More magic, boy. Your spell needs more strength."

Stephen nodded and concentrated his hardest this time. He let his magic build up first before he released it. "Lorum Ignis!" A huge, fiery red whip lashed out of his wand, struck a bookshelf and the bookshelf was instantly incinerated.

The whip was flailing about and it was all Stephen could do to hold on to his wand. "Control it, don't just stand there holding on for dear life!" the Dark Lord barked.

"It doesn't – want to be... controlled!" Stephen gasped.

"I don't care what it doesn't want to do, boy. You're the wizard. You control it," the Dark Lord stepped back and merely watched.

Uncountable cuts, injuries and burns later, Stephen had finally managed to bring the whip to heel. He stood there panting, utterly exhausted with his magic fizzled out. The Dark Lord raised a brow.

“You could not handle that? You still have the water, air and earth forms of the whip to handle. If you could not master but one form, then how am I to know you are capable of the rest?” he taunted.

Stephen flushed and scowled. “I can do it,” he retorted shortly.

Voldemort smirked. “Very well. I believe Mela has just made a fresh batch of healing potion from her class with Braon. Go to them to get those cuts treated.”

Nagini slithered in as Stephen left. -He isssss far different now than that Light-boy you found yearssss ago, masssster.-

-Yess, Nagini. He is.-

-The twins Marric and Mela are coming along fine alssssso. They are proving themselvesss loyal to you.-

Voldemort laughed. -They follow me because Stephen doessss... They are not loyal to me. They are loyal to Stephen. They would do anything for him.-

Nagini hesitated. -Is this a problem, masssster?-

-No, it is not- Voldemort paused speculatively. -It is good that the boy has companions who are willing to die for him.-
Elsewhere...

“Mum? Dad?” Francis asked as he saw his parents soberly seated in one of their parlors. Their expressions were unusually grave. Francis wondered whether it had anything to do with Professor Dumbledore’s visit just now.

Keelan observed his son. Francis knew all about the prophecy of course and it amazed his father how well he bore under it. Despite the great popularity, Francis managed to grow up as normal a son as one could hope. There were times when he could get a bit overbearing though, but Keelan brushed it off as a normal childhood phase.

“Francis, darling, come in,” Miranda entreated. Francis stepped inside and sat down on one of the squashy armchairs.

“What did Professor Dumbledore want, Mum? Dad?” Francis queried. Dumbledore was a constant figure in Francis’ life. Always appearing and disappearing, checking to see how Francis was and things like that.

“There was a raid in London last night,” Keelan told him gravely. “Eight people died, twenty or so were injured. None of the Death Eaters who did it were captured. The times are growing even more dangerous, son. These days, we don’t really know for sure who we can trust. And your mum and I aren’t always around to protect you.”

“What are you saying?” Francis was a bit worried as to where this conversation was leading.

“Professor Dumbledore came by with a proposition this morning. He wanted to know what you thought about starting to learn magic,” Keelan tried to grin weakly at his son.

“Learn... magic?” Francis asked.

“Just basic Shield Spells and the like,” Miranda hurriedly interjected. “Just in case something happens...”

Francis was silent for a moment. Then he whooped loudly. “Cool! I’m gonna start learning magic now? Will I get a wand? Who’ll be teaching me?”

Miranda and Keelan exchanged relieved looks. “I will,” Keelan smiled. “Who knows, Professor Dumbledore might take over when you’re old enough and you get better.”

Both parents laughed and chatted with their excited son, the happiness of the moment holding at bay the creeping darkness in their lives.

A few more months later...

“What are you reading?” Voldemort questioned as he came upon Stephen waiting for him in their training room, nose buried beneath a book.

The boy held up the book and the Dark Lord saw it was one about Ritual Magic. He raised a brow. “Ritual magic is a very obscure and unstable art,” Voldemort archly commented. “Why are you reading about it?”

“Partly curious. And partly because I want to learn how to do it,” Stephen replied.

“Ritual magic is both time-consuming and magic consuming. It is not efficient at all,” Voldemort growled.

“But its results are worth it. The rituals are extremely powerful and ancient, some of which have never been tried by any wizard today,” Stephen paused. “Except maybe you of course. Besides, Thran, don’t try to pretend you didn’t study ritual magic, too.”

Voldemort smiled grimly. “Of course I did. I suppose if it interests you that much you can pursue it. But don’t expect me to teach you.”

Stephen smirked as he set the book aside and got ready for their lesson. “Where’s the excitement in that?”

Thran ignored him. “Today you will be learning something very important.”

Stephen perked. “Really? What?”

“Wandless magic, boy. It’s extremely advantageous as your enemy has no idea what spell you will be casting. And with your Darkness powers, this will be a very formidable tool.”

Voldemort paused and thought for a while. "What was the very first spell you learned?"

Stephen could remember that moment like it was yesterday. "The Levitation Charm from Gal."

Voldemort nodded. "We'll start with that," he waved his wand and a feather appeared. Stephen sighed. Why was it always feathers? "The trick is to concentrate on the spell as hard as you can and on nothing else. Apply the lesson you learned in your Occlumency. Just think of the spell. Nothing else."

Voldemort glanced at the feather and without the Dark Lord saying anything, it began to float up of its own accord. "That is how it is done. Now you try it."

Three hours, fifty four minutes and forty six seconds later...

The Dark Lord's hand was twitching. That was not a good sign. But Stephen couldn't help it if the bloody feather didn't want to float now, could he? For the past three hours and Merlin knew how many minutes, he had been concentrating and saying Wingardium Leviosa over and over in his mind till he didn't think he could say any more words but those. Still the feather would not float.

Voldemort was astonished. He was shocked that he hadn't actually killed nor made any move to kill Stephen yet. If any one of his Death Eaters had behaved like this, said offender would have been long gone after thirty minutes. Despite his newfound patience though, the Dark Lord had a pressing meeting with the head of the vampire league in Romania in about ten minutes. His mind spun around to what would motivate Stephen to get the damn thing done.

The Dark Lord's expression became calm as he said, "If you do not get that feather in the air within ten minutes, I will confiscate your Nebula for six months."

The look of pure horror on Stephen's face made Voldemort smirk inwardly. Not to say that it didn't work. Within five minutes, the feather

was floating in the air and Stephen had done wandless magic for the first time.

Blackmail, thought Voldemort as he left his ecstatic student, did pay off.

An indefinite amount of time later...

Braon watched with a smile as Stephen, Mela and Marric dodged and chased each other in the air. The twins were on their Comet Two-Sixties and Stephen was on his Nebula. The water elemental loved watching the three flying in the huge backyard of the manor. Watching them now, Braon thought that no one would have guessed the three were under the wing of Lord Voldemort. By all appearances they looked perfectly normal.

A slight breeze blew and Braon didn't have to turn to know that her fellow elementals had arrived behind her.

"I do not exactly see what is so amusing at the sight of three children playing around," Aithinne commented in a sardonic tone.

"Children?" Braon asked, amused. "Are you forgetting that Marric managed to block each and every attack you threw at him yesterday? My dear Aithinne, even to a full grown wizard, that task is rarely accomplished."

Aithinne smiled proudly. "Yes. Marric's very good in defense I've noticed. Stealth, too. He's as good as Stephen is. And I don't believe I've yet met anyone with the exception of Master who could match Mela in cunning and the arts of manipulation."

"Master made a good decision to take them in," Braon agreed.

"It was more of Stephen than Master, actually," Gal pointed out. "His instinct is so finely honed I don't wonder sometimes if it's hidden clairvoyance."

"It's not," Braon wryly replied. "I'd know."

The four continued watching Stephen, Marric and Mela before finally returning inside the manor. Five minutes after they had gone, Stephen signaled to his friends and they met in mid-air.

“Are they gone?” Mela asked.

“I can’t feel their auras anymore,” Stephen told her. “So they must be.”

The three of them dived downwards and got off their brooms. Marric cast a Notice-Me-Not Charm around them while Stephen checked the Invisibility Wards. Satisfied that everything was as it should be, they began what they had been doing a week after Marric and Mela had met Stephen.

Each one of them closed their eyes and concentrated really hard.

Mela was the first one to begin to change. A pattern of feathers the same color as her hair began to appear all around her skin. Her bones grew smaller and she shrunk as the feathers became real ones. Her hair disappeared and her jaw elongated into a beak. Her feet morphed into sharp claws and the vision in her eyes grew clearer.

Marric suddenly found himself covered in shaggy, silvery fur. His hands and his feet changed into paws until he had to go down on all fours. His eyes remained the same amber color but elongated. His nose elongated too, snout-like and he found his sense of smell extremely heightened. He could smell Mela’s scent and Stephen’s. His teeth grew longer and his voice diminished into a growl.

Stephen quickly grew sleek black fur. His ears rounded out and were also covered in fur. His arms and legs became paws with extremely sharp retractable claws. The same green eyes lengthened. His own teeth turned into sharp fangs. His bones were suddenly lighter, his body and movement more fluid and graceful. He let out a long purr of pleasure.

Where Stephen, Marric and Mela had stood, there was now a panther, a wolf and a falcon. They had succeeded. They had become Animagi.

TBC

I know the chapter's rather short compared to the previous. Sorry about that. And some of you may be wondering why it took the three of them a comparatively short time to master their Animagus forms. Well they are brilliant after all and let's just say there are a lot of books on animal transformation in the manor's library. Books that Dumbledore definitely wouldn't have approved. Snicker. Read and review!

Coming up: Stephen kills

Chapter Thirteen: Stained Soul

"I have not yet been able to obtain the information you desire, my Lord," Snape humbly bowed before Voldemort.

"Crucio." Snape fell to the floor screaming and twitching in pain as the Cruciatus racked through his body. Voldemort stood over him, a displeased expression on his face.

"I expected better from you, Severus," the Dark Lord spoke softly. "My patience is running thin. I want the Sorcerer's Stone!"

Snape winced as Voldemort lifted the Cruciatus curse. "You shall have it, my Lord! Please, give me time! The fool Dumbledore has hidden it somewhere in Gringotts. I need more time to discover which vault it was placed in."

"Very well," the Dark Lord conceded. "You shall have your time. But bear in mind not to make me wait for long, Severus. My patience has its limits. There will be no more next time for you if you fail this."

Snape paled but kept his composure. "Yes, my Lord, I understand. I am heading over to the Eveleigh manor now, my Lord. Dumbledore is certain to be there. Today is, after all, his Golden Boy's birthday."

Voldemort's features darkened even more. "That Eveleigh child? We must wait for another chance to catch him vulnerable again. He must be killed as soon as possible. The power the prophecy says he has is a threat to me in the hands of the Order."

"Of course, my Lord," Snape agreed.

"Very well, Snape. Leave." The Death Eater was only too glad to leave the Dark Lord's presence.

Voldemort frowned. Something was niggling the back of his mind. He couldn't quite put his finger to what it was, though. He sat back silently, thinking. Snape's voice floated in his mind again. Today is, after all, his Golden Boy's birthday... Voldemort sat up quite suddenly.

Today was Francis Eveleigh's birthday. Today was also Stephen's birthday. In fact just before his meeting with Snape, Voldemort had left Stephen with Marric, Mela and his elementals. His young protégé had been opening the gifts everyone had given him.

Voldemort recalled the words of the prophecy that Snape had told him. The One with the power immeasurable approaches/ Born as the Seventh Month wanes/ Born of the blood of light and dark... Snape had told him that at first, there were three babies who the Order had thought the prophecy meant but Dumbledore had declared the Eveleigh boy the prophecy child. The Dark Lord knitted his brows. What had Dumbledore's basis for that been? Why Francis Eveleigh? Why not Neville Longbottom or... Voldemort paled for a second. Harry Potter. Of course. How could he have forgotten? The boy had been one of the candidates as the prophecy child.

So far as the Dark Lord knew, Francis Eveleigh had never remotely demonstrated that he had "power immeasurable". Stephen on the other hand... The Dark Lord flashed back to the first lesson he had had with Stephen when the boy had released some of his magic. Power immeasurable was an apt enough phrase to describe the strength of the boy's powers.

Could it be possible... that Stephen and not Francis Eveleigh was the prophecy child?
A couple of weeks later...

"Master, three of the prisoners have escaped from the dungeon," Rudolphus LeStrange reported, bowing before the Dark Lord.

"Who?"

"The Auror Simon Shackbolt, Martinson Gallagher and Channah Gallagher, my Lord. We have two squads of Death Eaters after them right now but it appears they have run for cover into the forest. We are in pursuit of them now, my Lord."

The forest. Stephen, Mela and Marric were outside flying on their brooms in the forest right now. Voldemort bit back an oath. Why did those three always have to make things complicated?

“Call off your squads, Lestrage,” the Dark Lord ordered.

“My Lord?” the Death Eater looked up, not quite believing what he was hearing. “You want me to call back the squads?”

“Do it. I will take care of this matter myself,” Voldemort hissed as he strode quickly out of the huge room. A very confused Rudolphus Lestrage was left in his wake, extremely thankful that the Dark Lord had not punished him for the prisoners’ escape.

Stephen stopped his broom in mid-air. Marric and Mela immediately noticed and flew over to join him.

“Something wrong?” Marric asked at the unusually alert expression on Stephen’s face.

“Someone’s here. In the forest,” Stephen intoned quietly. “Not a Death Eater. I think they’re outsiders. Let’s get down.”

They flew down and dismounted from their brooms. Casting Concealment Charms on themselves, the three of them immediately set off to the direction where the intruders were. Stephen, Marric and Mela hid behind a tree as two men and a woman burst into the clearing. They were obviously not Death Eaters. Mela pointed out their clothes to Stephen and Marric. The tattered rags and wounds showed that they were prisoners. Escaped prisoners.

“We must keep moving,” the tall, black man barked at his other two companions. “We’re too close to that blasted manor for comfort and they’ll have Death Eaters out for us already.”

“For pity’s sake Simon, give Channah a chance to catch her breath!” the other man cried out.

“Well unless you want to be thrown back in the dungeons Martin, I suggest we start moving now. Come, we’ll help her. Lift her left arm and I’ll take the right. Don’t move, Channah, Martin and I can carry you the rest of the way,” the one called Simon told the woman. The woman only had the strength to nod in agreement.

They were from the Light side that much Stephen knew. The instant hatred he felt for them was like poison coursing his veins. His grip on his wand instinctively tightened. On either side of him, he felt Marric and Mela draw their own wands.

“Don’t,” he whispered. “I’ll take care of this. I’ve been wanting to practice something for some time now.” He felt Marric and Mela nod then back off.

Stephen raised his wand. He hadn’t gotten to very advanced wandless magic yet. He still needed his wand when it came to powerful spells and charms. “Arcessere Caligo.”

Simon, Martin and Channah stopped dead in their tracks when in the blink of an eye, fog suddenly appeared all around them. It was thick, white fog and visibility, even from a few feet away, was nearly impossible. Simon cursed.

“This is magic. They’ve found us,” he spat out. “Let’s make a run for it.”

The three of them went faster and even Channah made an effort to run but weighted down with the injured woman, they couldn’t get very far. Especially as they did not know where they were going and kept bumping into bushes and trees or tripping over large tree roots. It was futile and the three of them knew it.

Stephen smiled grimly. This was fun. “Arcessere Fulmen,” he cast the next spell.

The three escaped prisoners narrowly avoided running headlong into another tree when their surroundings turned a shade darker. Simon saw that the sky was teeming with black stormclouds. He was so

shocked he just stood stock still for a second. This was impossible. There was no spell that could control the weather! ...Was there? Before he, Martin and Channah could begin running again, lightning flashed from the sky and struck the tree directly in front of them. The tree's branches burst into flame.

"Simon, let's move!" Martin's voice shook him out of his reverie.

"Move where?" Channah sobbed. "They've found us! They'll kill us now!"

Simon gritted his teeth. "I'll be damned if I escaped that prison only to be thrown back there again. We're escaping from this hellhole and that's that!" They ran once more through the thick mist.

Marric chuckled as his eyes followed them. "Impressive spellwork," he told Stephen.

"Thanks," Stephen smirked as he slapped Marric's hand in a high five.

Mela rolled her eyes. Boys. "They're getting away," she pointed out drolly. "And I don't really think Master will be very pleased if you set fire to the entire forest."

Stephen raised his wand again. "Arcessere Imber."

Channah was gasping for breath. Her legs felt like lead. Her arms that were being supported by Martin and Simon ached and the pain from her many wounds stabbed at her. She raised her head and was surprised when a small drop of water landed on her cheek. Another bolt of lightning struck down in front of them and this time it was followed by pouring rain that immediately drenched them.

How funny, Channah thought dreamily. She wasn't even completely lucid anymore. If the Death Eaters had caught them... If death was their fate... so be it. She had no desire to live anyway. She and Martin had been tortured over and over again for information the Dark Lord wanted. She would welcome death now gladly. So would Martin

she knew. But Simon? Channah knew he had a younger brother who was all he had left in the world. No. Simon would not want to die. But he didn't have a choice really. Channah giggled madly. None of them did.

The spell that Marric had done deflected the rain from them so they were quite dry. The rain had also put out the flames. Mela was silent beside Stephen who looked at the escaped prisoners still running about with utter contempt. Mela didn't know why Stephen hated them so much but if he did, then Mela decided they were worth her hatred too.

"What about one last spell?" Marric asked lazily.

Stephen smirked. "The coup de grace." He raised his wand.

Before he could speak another word, another voice beat him to it. "Finite Incantatem." Immediately, the fog dissipated, the thunderclouds rolled away, the lightning stopped flashing and the rain stopped pouring.

Stephen groaned. He knew that voice. His suspicions were confirmed when Thran walked over to them the next moment, an expression of anger on his features. Marric and Mela immediately bowed down before him. Why they did that confused Stephen, but he himself remained standing.

"What do you think you're doing?" Thran hissed.

"Er... practicing?" Stephen grinned weakly. The Dark Lord's eyes flashed. "Come on, Thran! We were just trying to help you catch those prisoners!"

"I have Death Eaters to do that, boy! I do not need three children!"

"Oh, are we talking about the same Death Eaters who let the said prisoners escape in the first place?" Stephen asked innocently. Mela had to suppress the urge to laugh.

Voldemort growled. "Vectura homines," he drawled out and waved his wand. Suddenly, the three escaped prisoners appeared in a heap before them in a flash of light. Stephen gaped. How had Thran done that?

"Stupefy." Voldemort followed up and the three were soon lying unconscious.

It was only then that Voldemort looked up to them again. "Stand up you two," he hissed then turned his attention to Stephen as Mela and Marric stopped bowing. "Practicing, eh? That was a good bit of weather magic you did. I don't remember teaching you to do it."

Stephen grinned. "Nah. I found some weather magic books and decided it'd be fun to learn. Although it did take me a few years before I could even start to perform some of the spells. I'd never really had the chance to practice it before."

Thran smirked. "Well if you wish to practice your magic, get those prisoners and follow me." The Dark Lord began to walk back to the manor.

Stephen shrugged. "Mobilicorpus." Simon's unconscious body floated in the air, directed by Stephen's wand. Marric and Mela did the same to Martin and Channah and the three of them followed the Dark Lord back inside the manor.

"Ennervate."

Simon groggily came to. He felt himself lying on cold hard stone and for a moment wondered how he had gotten there. Then it came to him. The escape, the mists, the magic-controlled weather... He frowned. Things began to blur from there. He faintly remembered three children and the Dark Lord peering down at him before he lost consciousness but that could've just been his imagination. Three children with the Dark Lord. Simon nearly laughed at the absurdity of the thought. Or he did until he turned over on the floor and saw the Dark Lord peering down at him. With three children. Then Simon was convinced he had lost his sanity.

Stephen rolled his eyes after he probed Simon's mind using Legilimency. "He thinks he's insane because you're with kids, Thran," the young boy grinned.

A groan indicated that Channah and Martin were beginning to wake too. Mela looked them over with a baleful eye. "How pathetic they look."

"W-what's going on?" Martin croaked out but stopped short when he saw what had stunned Simon into silence. Were those children with Voldemort? Channah rubbed her eyes, unsure if she was dreaming.

"The three of you," Voldemort addressed Stephen, Marric and Mela. "Are very strong. And you will grow stronger still. Unfortunately, my Death Eaters have an obvious advantage over you yet."

Stephen bristled. "Which is?"

"Experience," Voldemort shot back. "It can't be learned, it has to be lived. Doing the Killing Curse on a tarantula is eons different from doing it on an actual human being."

"So what exactly are you saying Thran?" Stephen asked, exasperatedly.

Voldemort fixed him with a penetrating look. "I thought you wanted practice," the Dark Lord replied softly.

Then Stephen understood. One glance at Marric and Mela told him that they understood too.

Was it worth it? Stephen pondered. Was all the power in the world worth killing these people? The answer came to him in the form of memories. A small boy of three tortured with the Cruciatus. A son starved for his parents' affection and love. A child terrified out of his wits, not understanding what the tingling power within him was. Then finally being accepted and taken in by the least likely person in the entire world. Stephen narrowed his eyes and all doubts in his heart

fled away as he raised his wand and pointed it at a terrified looking Channah.

“Crucio!”

To accomplish the Cruciatus, you must have the will in you to truly wish another person pain. Aithinne’s voice seemed to float in the air, mingling with the woman’s screams.

Marric and Mela had been brought up as proper purebloods should be. To do one’s duty. To be seen and not heard. To live for honor. They did not know friendship, they did not know affection. Until a messy-haired boy had stepped up just when they thought their lives were to end and had saved them. Their rooms were across the hallway from Stephen and it was impossible for them not to hear the other boy’s screams while he was in the throes of a nightmare. Stephen never knew but whenever he had nightmares and screamed like there was no tomorrow, Marric and Mela would quietly enter his room and stay there, sometimes trying to comfort him. Sometimes Mela would play a bit of music on the flute Gal had given her. It seemed to soothe Stephen. From the nightmares, they’d gleaned a bit about Stephen’s past, enough to understand. And they had vowed that never again would those nightmares happen.

You have but to ask me... and I will give you my life.

Marric and Mela raised their own wands to Simon and Martin.
“Crucio.”

Funny, how even screams raised a discordant melody all their own.

It was three hours of on and off Cruciatus curses then Thrane told them to stop. Voldemort ran a critical eye over the bodies of Simon, Channah and Martin, shivering from prolonged torture.

“That is enough. You have done an excellent job. Finish them off,” the Dark Lord ordered.

Three voices rose as one in the air. “Avada Kedavra!” A flash of green light later and Simon, Channah and Martin were no more. For the first time in their ten years, Stephen, Marric and Mela had killed. And looking back afterwards, they would never shed a tear for those first souls whose lives they took.

They say that killing another person stains the soul. That for some reason... you will never be completely whole again, Aithinne told him. Stephen had laughed. What rubbish. Months later...

Stephen grinned. “So, are we agreed then?”

“Sure thing!” Marric replied and Mela grinned back. Then the three of them went off.

The mission: to wreak as much havoc as possible. Especially with Thran away, negotiating with giants. The day: April first. Mela and Marric had educated Stephen as to what April first meant to the outside world. After which – with the typical mischievous grin on his face – Stephen had proposed that the three have a contest to find out who could pull the most ingenious pranks. Unfortunately as Mela had pointed out, there were really not that much people to prank in the headquarters of the Dark Order. Stephen had said he would take care of it.

Which was why when the Death Eaters arrived in the manor, they had no idea what lay in store for them.

“I don’t understand why Master had to owl us to come here,” Travers wondered in his nasal voice. “He could have let us know via the Dark Mark...”

“It is not our place, fool, to question what Master does,” Dolohov coldly replied.

From the small, circular window of the secret passageway, Stephen, Marric and Mela watched all the Death Eaters milling around.

“Well what’re we waiting for?” Stephen whispered. “Ignis Pluvia.”

Karkaroff shrieked and jumped out of the way as a ball of fire fell from the ceiling. The low chatter of the Death Eaters was halted when more fireballs fell like rain all over the room. Pandemonium ensued when their cloaks caught fire. And still fire fell. Some of the Death Eaters had formed shields around themselves. Some were running around crazed. Still some were helping their companions by trying to douse those whose cloaks had caught fire with water, but only accomplished half drowning the people they were trying to help.

“Oh, Merlin!” Mela could hardly speak from laughing out loud. Beside her, her twin and Stephen were doubled up laughing. She managed to halt giggling and smirked. “That’s nothing compared to this. Turbo ventus.”

Little tornadoes began to pop up around the room. Chaos was now complete. Stephen noted with interest that the fireballs were getting sucked into the tornadoes, creating a whirling vortex of flame. Nearly all the Death Eaters had caught fire now and smoke was beginning to choke the air. One of the Death Eaters finally had the brains to throw open one of the many doors that surrounded the room and run outside screaming. The rest of the doors were thrown open and in five minutes, the room was empty.

“Finite Incantatem. That was fast,” Stephen smirked. “Better get this room fixed before Thran finds out. Ordinatus.” The scorch marks vanished and everything was neat and tidy and clean again.

“They split up. They’re all around the manor,” Marric told him.

“Well let’s hunt them down.”

Lucius Malfoy was having a very bad day. Today was his mother-in-law’s birthday and he, Narcissa and Draco had been lunching with the Blacks when the owl arrived, requesting his presence at the manor at once. He had excused himself and hurried here still in his dress robes because he of all people knew how displeased the Dark Lord was with latecomers. Now instead of the meeting with Voldemort, he had nearly been burned to death, blown apart by those mini-

tornadoes and his dress robes were ruined. Oh, and of course there was the fact that he was lost in this godforsaken humongous manor (larger even than Malfoy Manor, Lucius couldn't help but notice). What more could possibly go wrong?

"Crustum!" he heard someone say behind him. Grasping his wand, Lucius Malfoy spun around.

SPLAT! The Death Eater stood motionless for one second before raising a hand and wiping it over his face. He stared at the substance that was now splattered all over his face, his robes, his everything. It was –

"Pies!" Marric chortled. "Cream pies! That was the best you could do? Not very imaginative, sister dearest."

Mela sniffed and scowled at Marric. "He's a finicky sort, Lucius Malfoy. I'd like to see you do better!"

Peter Pettigrew was out of breath and deathly terrified. He had run away from the room as fast as he could. Was the Dark Lord going to kill them all now? Because surely that was what the fire rain was for? The Marauder was close to tears. He did not know where he was in the manor. And he did not know where the other Death Eaters were either.

In the shadows at the end of the hallway, Peter thought he saw something move. He squinted. Was it just him or were those silhouettes human? Too small to be Death Eaters though... He began to back off slowly. Then he heard a voice saying what sounded like a spell. He was about to turn and run when figures started popping up around him.

Peter blinked. They were clowns. Brightly dressed, bright-haired clowns with big noses. And were those... Peter felt a bolt of fear as he recognized the objects the clowns were clutching. They were muggle machine guns. And at the moment, they were pointed at him. One of the clowns gave a honking laugh and fired.

Peter shrieked and ran for his life.

“Little rat,” Stephen commented maliciously.

“That wasn’t better than my spell, Mar,” Mela smirked. “Muggle weapons, I tell you.”

Severus Snape stared. And stared. And stared. He could have sworn that door had not been there a moment ago. And he could also have sworn that there was a hallway behind him a moment ago. Blinking, Snape decided that he didn’t really have a choice. Turning the doorknob, he entered the room.

And blinked again. The room was blinding. Everything was a shocking pink. The rugs, the armchairs, the table, the floor, the walls, the ceilings. A shocking, vibrant, neon pink. A muscle near his face twitched. In slow, measured steps he walked to the pink-rimmed mirror that hung on one wall.

And bit back a scream. His robes and hair had also turned a shocking pink. With tremendous effort, Severus Snape managed to keep himself from fainting.

Stephen couldn’t stop laughing. “I’ve always wanted to try that on him,” he confessed.

Regulus Black kept twitching nervously and it was getting on Rudolphus Lestrangle and Evan Rosier’s nerves. Lestrangle saw Rosier’s hand twitching and knew he was eager to curse the Black into nothingness. Lestrangle rolled his eyes. Regulus’ brother may have been a blood-traitor, but he at least had guts. Unlike his cowardly excuse of a sibling.

Something soft and slightly wet hit Rosier on the neck. He raised his hand to his neck and stared at the thing. Furious, he rounded on Regulus.

“So, you think throwing dung at me is funny, eh Black?” he growled angrily, raising his wand.

“Oy, peabrain! Not him. Over here!” a small, high-pitched voice yelled.

Rosier raised his head to see who had spoken when another handful of dung hit him smack on the face. Lestrangle stifled a laugh while Black looked, if possible, even more scared than ever. The thing that had thrown it was a poltergeist. With a wicked smile, the poltergeist then proceeded to pelt all three of them with dung, singing and laughing in glee.

“Where’d you get the poltergeist?” Stephen asked.

“I have my ways,” Mela preened.

“Impedimenta!” Augustus Rookwood aimed behind him, hoping it would be enough to stop them. By the sound and chattering, he guessed not.

He had no idea where the pixies had come from but he didn’t intend to stay there and let them harm him more. He was running from pixies. Rookwood did not even want to ponder how wrong that statement sounded. He turned a corridor, wrenched open a random door and ran inside. Locking the door with his wand, he breathed a sigh of relief. Hopefully, the pixies wouldn’t find him in here.

He turned around to examine the room and wished he hadn’t. A fully grown Norwegian Ridgeback was slumbering in the middle of the room. Rookwood felt himself break out in a cold sweat. The Ridgeback cracked open one eye and Rookwood unlocked the door and ran back outside to the pixies, screaming like a girl.

Marric rolled his eyes. “And to think that wasn’t even a real dragon.”

“This is a very strange room,” William Carrows commented trying to hide his anxiety. Bellatrix Lestrangle rolled her eyes. As if the statement wasn’t obvious enough. The room was filled with mirrors. Wavy mirrors, mirrors that made you look taller, mirrors that made you look fatter and even more than Bella cared to name. It was quite amusing if they could figure out how to get out of here.

Bella paused in front of one of the mirrors, wanting to see her reflection. The person who looked back at her also had heavy-lidded

black eyes and black hair but instead being a woman the person was...

“A man?” Bellatrix asked blankly. Behind her, Carrows screamed. She turned quickly and was shocked speechless. William had turned into a girl. Carrows took one look at her and screamed again.

“What? What is it?” she asked Carrows impatiently. He (or she as the case was now) merely pointed. Bellatrix looked down and examined her own body. The reflection hadn’t lied, she realized shocked. Instead of her woman’s curves down there she saw...

The three of them couldn’t stop laughing. “Brilliant spell!” Marric managed to choke out to Stephen when they heard Bellatrix LeStrange’s scream.

Stephen, Marric and Mela were chortling and walking down the corridor, trying to find more Death Eaters. Stephen grinned. They should’ve done this earlier. It really was fun to play with Thran’s Death Eaters.

Stephen smirked as he saw Mulciber and Crabbe from a distance. “Damage time, guys,” he declared and raised his wand.

“What do we have here?” a voice coldly asked.

Stephen, Marric and Mela spun around. It was Lavinia Yaxley, one of the Death Eaters. She was one of the rather talented ones, Stephen thought and cursed himself for not feeling her approaching.

“I do believe I’ve found the culprits to all that’s been happening around here,” Yaxley called out. Behind her came up Malfoy, Snape, Rabastan LeStrange, Macnair, Karkaroff and Dolohov. They all looked livid.

“Kids?” Dolohov spat out. “They’re who’ve been doing this? I didn’t happen to find it funny!”

Stephen scowled. Grasping Mela and Marric's hand, he muttered a spell and before Yaxley could even raise her wand to stop him, he, Marric and Mela had disappeared.

"Did they just Apparate?" Snape asked incredulously.

"Impossible!" Malfoy growled. "You can't Apparate or Disapparate anywhere here!"

"Well they went somewhere! And we need to find them!"

Lord Voldemort rather thought his meeting with the giants had gone rather productively. But as usual, he had a lot on his mind. For a few weeks now, he had been toying with the idea of introducing Stephen to his Death Eaters. The boy was fast mastering his Darkness and he was more than capable to take on any of the Dark Lord's Death Eaters and beat the pulp out of them now.

Voldemort's only problem was that he didn't know how to go about doing it and when. He wondered how Stephen would take the news as he appeared in front of the manor's front doors. Throwing open the doors, he strode inside to find his elementals waiting for him. He frowned.

Gal and Braon were laughing like there was no tomorrow. Aithinne's mouth was twitching and even Scraithin looked like he was smiling faintly.

"What is it?" the Dark Lord asked.

"M-master," Aithinne couldn't suppress a chortle. "I'm afraid Stephen, Marric and Mela have been... up to something, while you were away."

TBC

How will Voldie take it? Miracle he hasn't had a heart attack yet. This chapter was so much fun to write!

Coming up: Stephen, Marric and Mela meet the Death Eaters

Chapter Fourteen: The Dark Prince

“What have you done to my Death Eaters, boy?” the Dark Lord asked without preamble as he strode into Stephen’s room.

Stephen blinked innocently at him as he looked up from the book he was reading. The whole effect was ruined though by the smile that was twitching at the end of his lips. “Whatever are you talking about, Thran?”

The Dark Lord growled. “Accio Nebula!” Stephen’s Nebula came flying towards Thran’s outstretched hand. Stephen gave a loud cry of protest but was silenced by the end of Voldemort’s wand pointed to his Nebula.

“What. Happened.” The Dark Lord definitely did not look or sound pleased.

Stephen sighed. He narrated everything that had happened, albeit editing some parts to make it sound like it was all his idea and he had just roped Marric and Mela into it. Stephen knew they were partly scared of Voldemort and he didn’t want the Dark Lord punishing them for something that Stephen had done. Voldemort’s eyebrow went up when Stephen started narrating the pranks they had pulled on the Death Eaters with obvious relish.

The Dark Lord found himself slightly speechless by the time Stephen was done with his tale, looking very pleased. Voldemort merely shook his head. Trust the boy to prank his Death Eaters and actually get away with it.

“Who saw you?” Voldemort asked, surprising Stephen with the question.

“What?”

“Who among my Death Eaters saw you, boy?”

“Oh. Well, let’s see. It was Yaxley who caught us actually,” Stephen recalled. “Lestrangle, Malfoy, Snape, Macnair, Dolohov and that coward Karkaroff were there too.”

“And you think they got a good enough look at your faces?” Voldemort demanded.

Uh-oh. Stephen’s eyes widened. He had not exactly thought about that... “Er... well I don’t know about the others but I suppose Yaxley did...” he confessed.

The Dark Lord thought for a moment. When Stephen had first arrived here, there was no doubt about the fact that he was James Potter’s son. But now, Voldemort looked him over with a critical eye. The face still had some features similar to Potter’s. But the black hair that was so messy on his father fell artfully around Stephen’s face, framing it and managing to look not at all messy but sophisticated. Unlike James Potter, Stephen did not wear glasses (Thran had sent him immediately to Braon the moment he complained of his eyesight and the water elemental had fixed the problem). He was lean, tall for a ten year old and had slightly suntanned skin from all the flying outdoors. Voldemort supposed that if one looked hard enough then one would see similarities between Stephen and his father, but a cursory glance at the boy did not at all reveal his heritage.

Voldemort stopped as a thought came to him. What more perfect moment to introduce the boy to his Death Eaters than now? Of course, Stephen would have to wear a mask but as some of his Inner Circle Death Eaters had seen the boy anyway, the Dark Lord did not see any reason why all of them should not know Stephen’s position in the Dark Order.

“Thran?” Stephen asked. The Dark Lord snapped out of his thoughts.

“What?” he snarled.

“I don’t know,” Stephen frowned. “But you have that look on your face like just before you spring some horribly impossible mission on

your Death Eaters and it actually works though they wouldn't have thought it would."

The Dark Lord frowned. "You are impossible. But that is beside the point. I have something for you to do..."

"He wants us to what?" Marric gaped at Stephen.

"Be there when he introduces us to his Death Eaters," Stephen muttered sullenly.

"And you don't want that to happen? It sounds somewhat fun actually," Mela looked up from transfiguring an armchair into a shrub.

"Meeting Thran's minions?" Stephen snorted. "All they're likely to do is either suck up to me or start plotting how to get rid of me so they can be Thran's 'favorite' again."

"And tell me again why Mela and I have to be there?" Marric scowled.

"He wants all three of us there. Why, I have no idea. Probably his idea of punishment because of the whole prank thing," Stephen gloomily answered.

Marric and Mela exchanged a panic-stricken look. "Stephen, you do know that some of those Death Eaters have seen us right? They know who we are."

Before Stephen could reply, three house elves popped in. "We is begging your pardons, sirs and miss!" one of them squeaked out in a high, shrill voice. "The Master is asking us to bring you these, sirs and miss!" They set the neatly folded garments on a sofa and popped away.

Stephen walked over and folded out one of them. They were robes. His mouth fell open. Very high quality robes, to be exact. The purest midnight black, with the Dark Mark emblazoned in green and silver on the front. Made of the finest linen and cotton and lined with silk.

Marric approached him and picked up one of the masks. His and Mela's mask were black (unlike the Death Eaters' that were white) and lined with green and silver. A small coiled snake was hissing near the forehead. Stephen's mask was quite similar to theirs with only one difference. Instead of the small green snake coiled at the forehead part, his had the words 'Atrum Proceris'.

Marric scrunched his brow. "Atrum Proceris?"

Stephen was quiet for a second. "It's Latin. It means 'Dark Prince'." His cheeks reddened slightly.

Mela turned from the mirror where she was admiring her reflection with the new robes on. "Dark Prince, hm?" she walked over to them. "Well, Master made a perfect choice. It suits you." The next day...

"I'm telling you, Augustus, they were children! I saw them with my own two eyes!" Lavinia Yaxley hissed at Rookwood.

"Are you sure it wasn't merely a hallucination?" Rookwood frowned.

Lucius Malfoy and Antonin Dolohov came up from behind Yaxley. "We saw them, too, Augustus. Are you implying we all saw the same 'hallucination'?" Malfoy mocked. Rookwood flushed.

They had all felt the Dark Mark burn, summoning them back here. Most of the Death Eaters had felt trepidation, perhaps expecting fire to start raining from the ceiling again. But nothing had happened, except for the fact that the Dark Lord was not yet inside the huge room when the Death Eaters arrived.

Lucius Malfoy looked around. It was the biggest gathering of the Dark Order for a long time. All of the Death Eaters, Inner and Outer Circle (except for those in Azkaban) were here. Fenrir Greyback and the werewolf horde were present also. As were the vampire clans of Romania and Transylvania. He could pick out a hag or four in the crowd as well as ghosts and Dark Veelas, who were attracting a lot of

attention. There were no giants, although that was no surprise as they were too big for the manor and were not really credited with an overabundance of brains. There were no dementors, too. Lucius never saw them except in battles or raids.

He wondered what had happened that would warrant all of these members of the Dark Order to be present. Then he wondered if it had anything to do with what had happened yesterday.

Severus Snape was, as usual, brooding in a corner. His thoughts flitted back to the three children he had seen yesterday. He could have sworn he saw the one boy and the girl before. They looked so much alike. But they had gone before he could place them. The one that disturbed him the most however was the third boy. The one with the green eyes just as cold and empty as the Dark Lord's red ones. Severus felt he had seen those eyes before... He frowned. What in Merlin's name had those kids been doing inside the manor? Surely the Dark Lord knew. Voldemort knew everything that went on in this place. It was like he had eyes everywhere.

Speaking of the Dark Lord... Snape went down on one knee as the entire room silenced and bowed at the entrance of Lord Voldemort.

The Dark Lord's eyes took in the room. "I am... disappointed, Death Eaters," he began silkily. But he did not sound disappointed. More of amused, Snape thought. "That you could let mere children humiliate you like that."

Quite a few faces flushed behind white masks. Snape saw Greyback smirking and had no doubt the werewolf had heard about yesterday's happenings.

"But that is beside the point," Voldemort continued airily. "Why did you not capture these children?"

"M-my Lord, they disappeared before we could do anything more," Yaxley's voice held the barest hint of a tremble.

“ Disappeared?” the air turned palpably heavier. “Define... disappeared.”

“They vanished into thin air, my Lord,” Karkaroff replied in his irritatingly unctuous voice.

“Thus you were not able to capture them?”

“N-no, my Lord...” Karkaroff’s voice faltered.

“And what, my loyal Death Eater, do you suppose the punishment for this failure must be?” Voldemort’s voice was closer to a hiss now.

Karkaroff’s eyes had widened in utter fear behind the white mask but before he could reply, another voice beat him to it. “They’re like shivering chickens aren’t they?”

Snape raised his head, shocked. It was a young, boyish voice, laden with cheer and shot through with contempt. From the shadows behind the dais, three figures dressed in resplendent black robes emerged. Snape was rigid and stunned. Aside from their magnificently elegant robes, they didn’t wear the white masks of the Death Eaters. They wore black masks with green and silver. A snake was etched in the masks of two of them but the one who had spoken had the words ‘Atrum Proceris’ etched into his. They were children.

“They are not the ones skulking about in the shadows,” the Dark Lord tartly replied. “Come out here.”

Snape now saw them in the glow of the muted light. They were children all right. He placed them at around nine to eleven years old. And they were, he noticed with a sinking feeling in his stomach, the same children he and the other Death Eaters had seen yesterday.

“We weren’t skulking,” the boy in the corrected with a grin. “We were merely observing this lot nearly pissing their pants off in fear of you.”

There were mixed reactions to this statement, Snape saw. Most of it was outrage. Severus meanwhile was merely waiting for the Dark Lord to curse the boy. Had any Death Eater dared to speak like that, he wouldn't have lived long enough to regret his statement.

"Now then, Karkaroff. Perhaps you would like to enlighten me on the fitting punishment you deserve," Voldemort trained his red eyes on Karkaroff once more. "For not managing to capture these three?"

Karkaroff tried to speak but no words would come out. Voldemort smirked. "Perhaps you would like to do the honors?" he gestured to the three children.

"Rictusempra!"

"Tarantallegra!"

"Furnunculus!"

Three hexes hit Karkaroff at the same time. He was doing some sort of jerky dance, all the while wheezily laughing with boils sprouting all over his face. No mere child could perform those spells, Snape thought a shiver running down his spine. Who were these children?!

It was five minutes of tense, horrified silence before Voldemort lazily twirled his wand. "Finite Incantatem." An out of breath Karkaroff gratefully stopped the insane dancing.

You could have dropped a pin in the room and it's clatter would have been heard by every ear. Each Death Eater's eye was tuned to Voldemort now, expectant of an explanation. The Dark Lord turned to his mass of followers.

"Death Eaters, I would like you all to meet my protégés," the Dark Lord announced as the three children stepped forward.

Snape felt his head spinning. This was not happening. Where in Merlin's name had those children come from?! And how could they have learned those spells at so young an age? The repercussions of

this were not lost on Snape. This was simply another sign of the still growing power and triumph of the Dark Order. Dumbledore had instilled so much hope with the prophecy child but any of these three looked like they could finish off Francis Eveleigh with one curse. Another horrifying thought struck Snape. Did these children know the Unforgivables already? Knowing Voldemort...

Snape felt sick. They were just children. What in Salazar's name had Voldemort done?

"Master... are these children," Bellatrix Lestrange stressed the word children maliciously. "To enter our ranks?"

Marric bristled at the word children but the smile stayed firmly on Stephen's face. It was just his green eyes that went a shade colder and Mela could feel the temperature drop around them.

"They are a part of the Dark Order, Bella," Voldemort's voice was amused. "But they are not to join the ranks of the Death Eaters. They are... different."

"Will they be joining us in missions and raids, my Lord?" the sly voice of Lucius Malfoy spoke up next.

"Why yes, of course, Malfoy," the Dark Lord hissed. "They are more than capable. More capable in fact, than most of you." His eyes roved the room, seeing his Death Eaters bristle with indignation. Quite a lot of them gave covertly feral looks to Stephen, Marric and Mela who just stood there looking coolly unruffled.

Voldemort continued. "They will be joining you on missions soon, you need not worry about that."

Travers couldn't hold it in anymore. The sheer nerve of these kids! "My Lord, I must respectfully beg of you to forgive me," he blurted out. "But I protest to these children joining us in missions so soon! They are inexperienced and would prove to be a liability to the missions. In all likelihood, they'll bungle up somehow and get us caught by the Ministry or the Order of the Phoenix!"

Travers earned himself a hostile look from the Dark Lord. "You doubt my judgment?" Voldemort demanded coldly.

Travers' eyes widened. "N-no, my Lord! Of course not! I bend to your will and judgment in all things! I am your most loyal servant!"

"He doesn't doubt your judgment," the young boy who had spoken before spoke now again. The Death Eaters shivered, noticing how alike his voice seemed to the Dark Lord's. That potentially chilling mixture of disdain and contempt. "He just doesn't like the fact that we mere children are stealing the limelight. When we can obviously do anything better than he can anyway."

Travers looked ready to kill the boy but his great fear of Lord Voldemort's reaction were he to jump up and Avada Kedavra the Dark Lord's protégé was so great that it stayed his hand.

"That is enough. From here onward, these three are your equals. And if I hear another word against it," crimson eyes glittered ominously. "There will be dire consequences."
Later...

"What did you think of them?" the Dark Lord asked as he and Stephen finished their training for the day.

Stephen had collapsed into an armchair, incredibly tired. Whenever he and Thran trained with his Darkness, it always took a lot out of him. He gulped down some of Braon's prepared Energizing Potions. Otherwise, he would have been bedridden from too much fatigue. He made a face at the Dark Lord's question.

"Vultures, the lot of them," he answered sourly. "Although there are some who are worthy of merit. Yaxley, for one. Lestrangle has her good moments as does Dolohov. Malfoy is as tricky as they get and Snape is excellent. Though I could swear there's something that's not right about him... but maybe it's just me."

Stephen scowled as he continued, "I still don't see why you had to introduce me to them already. More than half of them want me dead right now, I'm quite certain of it. I'll have my hands full avoiding their flimsy traps the next few months."

Thran raised a brow. "Well if you cannot avoid death by my Death Eaters, boy, then you are hopeless. You need to assert yourself among them in your own way, without my help. If you can do that, then you are more than ready to face the Light side."

Stephen sighed. "Did you really mean what you said? About us going on missions and raids?"

"You, yes. With Marric and Mela, I plan to wait until they have completed their studies with the elementals. Do you have anything to say about it?" Voldemort's tone clearly implied that Stephen should not have anything to say about it.

Wisely enough, Stephen shook his head. He thought pensively for a second. "You know, that might not be a bad thing after all," he said contemplatively. "I'd like to practice my magic..."

Voldemort looked up sharply. "No Darkness."

"What???"

"You are not to use your Darkness in missions, boy. At least not yet."

"But Thran!" Stephen cried out.

"You have mastered your magic, you know nearly as much enchantments as I do and you are well on your way to mastering weather magic. I doubt whether you need the use of your Darkness," Voldemort pointed out.

"I know but... it would be fun to freak your Death Eaters out."

Lord Voldemort controlled his patience. "Boy, let me make it clear to you now. In missions, you attack the enemy. Not my Death Eaters. You are not to use your Darkness and you are to have that mask on your face at all times. Do. You. Understand?"

Stephen smiled weakly. "Yes, Thran."

"Children!" Bellatrix spat out in a venomous voice.

She, her husband Rudolphus, his brother Rabastan, Lucius, Robert Travers and Narcissa Malfoy were seated in one of the parlors inside Malfoy Manor. They were still trying to internalize the surprise Voldemort had sprung on them.

"I do not understand," Narcissa took a delicate sip of her tea. "Why would the Dark Lord wish for them to join?"

"They are his students after all..." Lucius Malfoy said thoughtfully then frowned at the thought of Voldemort having students. It was a rather hard thought to imagine.

"Don't talk of them like that," Rudolphus Lestrange proclaimed harshly. "Remember, we still know nothing about those children. For all we know, they are nearly as powerful as the Dark Lord themselves. Those spells they did at the headquarters..."

"Don't be foolish, Rudo," Bellatrix sneered. "Any second year worth his dice can learn those spells. Those children must have taken longer to learn it but those spells are by no means impossible to cast. I doubt highly whether they are capable of higher magic."

"I agree with Bellatrix," Travers growled. "Those kids are nothing but trouble. I don't know how the Dark Lord can be convinced they won't be the ruin of us all."

"Well it's not like we can do anything about it," Rabastan spoke. "Our Lord has spoken."

A sudden smile lit up Bellatrix's face ferociously. "Who says we cannot do anything about it?" she commented softly.

Lucius' eyes sharply met hers. "You heard what the Dark Lord said, Bella."

"My Lord merely stated that they are our equals. He did not say anything else," she reminded. Her heavy-lidded eyes were malicious as she continued. "Now imagine we were on a raid. And some... accident happens to one of them. Surely we cannot be held accountable? After all, as equals we need not look out for them."

The same smile soon spread over Travers face. "I positively adore the way you think, my dear," he murmured.

Lucius frowned. "I don't know..."

"Oh, don't be such a bore, Lucius. You know perfectly well we cannot have children in the Dark Order. The very thought is scandalous. Why, they cannot be much older than Draco!"

"True," Rabastan mused. "Bella's idea has some merit."

Malfoy looked up. "Very well. But we must be utterly careful and word of this must never reach the Dark Lord."

"Our lips are sealed, Lucius."

Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix

"Atrum Proceris," Snape stated. "What do those words mean, headmaster?"

Dumbledore frowned slightly. "You have just come from a meeting with Voldemort have you not, Severus? What happened and where did you see those words?"

Seated in front of Dumbledore in an overly squashy armchair and toying with a lemon drop in one hand, Snape narrated the events of the meeting to Dumbledore. The headmaster's left hand, which had

been stroking his phoenix's feathers stayed when Snape got to the part about the children. The light in Dumbledore's twinkling blue eyes dimmed and he closed them for a second. Snape felt that he saw the horror in his eyes reflected in Dumbledore's.

"The strangest part of the matter is that the two other children seemed familiar to me. As if I had seen them somewhere. But I can't seem to pinpoint where..." he paused. "Though it was the third, headmaster, who made me feel most uneasy. I could swear I've seen those eyes before. I could just swear it. But I can't remember!" Snape ended with a frustrated note.

Dumbledore was silent for moments. When he finally looked to Severus, his eyes were filled with pain. "Severus, those words that you saw written on the boy's mask were in Latin. Literally translated, they mean 'Dark Prince'."

Snape blinked. "Dark... Prince?"

Dumbledore nodded soberly. "Yes. I am afraid so. Voldemort truly introduced him as his protégé?"

"He introduced all three of them as his protégés."

"Quite right... But about that third child. There is something different about him. Something that sets him apart even in the Dark Lord's eyes. You yourself noted that difference," Dumbledore mused.

The headmaster looked out the window with eyes so weary of fighting the war. "We must find out who that child is Severus. We must."

TBC

Will Dumbledore really find out who the Dark Prince is? I'll try to update faster but the semester's nearly ending and my schedule's piling up. I might die from the freaky workload... Read and review fellas!

Coming up: Francis goes to Hogwarts and Stephen goes on a mission!

Chapter Fifteen: A First Time For Everything

September first in Platform Nine and Three Quarters should have been filled with cheery, bustling people. It should have been filled with upper classmen, some in their robes and some not, greeting their friends and already exchanging summer stories ("This really cute boy moved in next door. I invited him over and..."). It should've been filled with new students, slightly scared and hesitant to start school yet excited at the same time ("I hear there's a poltergeist there! Can't wait to see it!"). It should've been filled with parents, apprehensive that their children would have to leave again for school, and giving them last minute reminders ("If you ever need anything at all, don't hesitate to owl us"). But it wasn't.

This September first, Platform Nine and Three Quarters was subdued and conversations were held in low, tense voices. It was the height of the reign of terror of Lord Voldemort and one could never know when the Dark Mark would next be fired into the sky or who would die. One never knew if friend or brother had been turned by the darkness. One simply did not trust that easily.

The teenagers still stuck close to their parents. Those who did not were in large groups with their friends. Rarely was laughter heard. Suspicious glances were cast everywhere, particularly at the students who sported the green serpent of Slytherin on their school robes. This was the atmosphere when Francis first entered through the barrier. His eyes beheld the gleaming glory of the Hogwarts Express but the nervous, high-strung energy in the air caused his smile to turn down slightly. His mother gripped his shoulders tightly. Soon enough, his father and the Auror who had accompanied them to Platform Nine and Three Quarters materialized behind him and his mother.

Heads turned when people caught a glance of Francis. Immediately, a buzz of conversation ensued. Everyone in the Wizarding World knew Francis Eveleigh. Who couldn't know their future savior after all? Francis grinned again but the Auror with his father frowned.

"I knew we should've brought more people with us," the Auror growled.

“Relax, Rufus,” Keelan Eveleigh answered. “If we had brought more Aurors, people would have panicked, thinking there was an attack imminent here.”

Rufus Scrimgoeur cast a baleful eye over Keelan Eveleigh. “You of all people know the importance of your son’s safety.”

“I assure you, Rufus,” Keelan’s voice was pleasant but hard as steel. “That I have Francis’ best interests at heart.”

People started coming up to Francis to shake his hand, say hello, introduce themselves and one or two even fainted at the mere thought of having the prophesied savior so close to them. Francis took it all in stride, smiling and greeting them back. Scrimgoeur had to hand it to the kid. He knew how to handle attention. The Auror could tell he even enjoyed all the publicity.

“Mum, Dad look! It’s Ron and the Weasleys. Let’s go over,” he said excitedly.

The Eveleighs walked over to where Molly Weasley was lecturing Fred and George. “ – more pranks this year! Why last year alone was enough, the shame of receiving all those letters about your behavior! I tell you if you don’t clean up your act now, I’ll – Oh. Dear me, Francis! Hello, Keelan, Miranda,” Mrs. Weasley had finally spotted them and warmly greeted them.

Fred and George took this opportunity to run away, snickering. “Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Eveleigh,” Percy Weasley greeted solemnly, making sure their eyes did not miss the prefect’s badge pinned to his robes.

“A prefect, Percy? How wonderful!” Miranda congratulated him.

“Well yes. And hopefully it’s on to be Head Boy,” Molly Weasley smiled in pride.

They took a few more minutes congratulating Percy before he excused himself and strolled off. Francis and Ron were already talking excitedly.

“I suppose Francis is excited at starting school now?” Molly queried.

“More excited at showing off, probably,” Keelan smiled. “The kid’s proud of the fact that he can already do magic. And when we were buying his school things he wouldn’t stop pestering Miranda and me about what Hogwarts was like. He barely slept a wink last night.”

“Ron hopefully already knows about it more or less what with his brothers. It’s good that he and Francis are going together, I suppose. Better to start school with a friend.”

“Good?” Miranda asked wryly. “They’ll probably follow up in your twin sons’ footsteps.” She watched Francis showing Ron his new owl and sighed.

“Now, now, Miranda,” Molly patted her hand. “It’s quite alright. I know you and Keelan will be missing him badly but this is good for the boy. You’ll soon get used to it, believe me. Although it does take time.”

Miranda smiled at her friend gratefully. “Thank you, Molly. I can’t help but feel uneasy though. What with the Dark Lord and all...”

“Why, Francis is going to Hogwarts! I can’t imagine a safer place for him to stay in than under the wing of Dumbledore himself.”

Francis waved at his parents as their silhouettes grew smaller and smaller. Soon, he couldn’t see them at all. He grinned at Ron who was seated across him. School was going to be the best experience of his life.

Ron was grimacing as he examined his sandwich. “Corned beef. Again.” He tossed it to the corner of the compartment. “I can’t believe you’ve got an owl! I tried to ask Mum and Dad for one, but they went off to buy Percy new school robes first. Just because he’s a prefect.”

“Yeah well, mum and dad wanted to make sure I could ‘communicate’ with them,” Francis told him. “They’re rooting for me to be in Gryffindor. What about you?”

“Gryffindor of course!” Ron looked as though the very idea of not making it scandalized him. “It’d be humiliating if I didn’t get in. Whole family’s been there.”

Francis shrugged. “Mum was a Gryffindor. Dad was a Slytherin.”

Ron gaped. “Say what? Your father was in Slytherin? No way! Mr. Eveleigh’s really nice!”

Francis nodded. “He is now. Mum said she was responsible for him changing. I dunno, though. They never talk about it much.” Then his eyes widened and his expression dimmed.

“Francis? Mate, you alright?” Ron asked concerned.

“I just remembered something,” Francis said quietly. “Professor Dumbledore came by last night to talk to Mum and Dad. I overheard a bit of what they were talking about.”

“What was it?” Ron questioned curiously.

Francis gazed hard at him. “Promise you won’t tell anyone.”

“Come on, Francis. You know me,” Ron grinned.

Francis hesitated before telling Ron what he had heard about the Dark Prince. When he finished, Ron was looking incredulous.

“Whoa! You mean You-Know-Who is training some kid or something? No way!” Ron declared.

Francis shrugged. “I think it was true. Professor Dumbledore said he was absolutely certain of it anyway.”

“Don’t worry about it, mate! There’s no way any Dark Prince can hold against you!” Ron grinned at him.

Francis smiled. "Thanks, Ron." But disturbing things remained in his head all the same.

He and Ron spent the rest of the time in idle chatter or playing Exploding Snap. Soon, the witch with the trolley came through and Francis bought a bit of everything from her. When Ron stared at him, he shrugged and told Ron they would share. They were swapping Chocolate Frog cards when the compartment door slid open. It was a round-faced chubby boy who looked distressed.

"Hullo, Neville," Francis greeted. "Something wrong?"

"Oh, Francis. Ron," Neville replied. "I lost Trevor, my toad! Have you seen him?" Both boys shook their heads. "I guess I'll search farther down the train then."

Before he could close the compartment door, another voice spoke. "Why it's Longbottom. Still looking for your ugly pet? It was probably so scared of your face, it ran off," a boy's voice drawled to poor Neville. "Who've you got in there, Longbottom?"

Francis and Ron saw a pale blond boy with gray eyes look inside the compartment. The boy was flanked by two big boys who seemed to glare squintily at everybody. Francis and Ron's eyes immediately narrowed.

"Malfoy!" Ron spat out.

"Red hair and tattered robes? My, my if it isn't a Weasley," Draco Malfoy sneered. "And of course here we have the Savior of the Wizarding World. Ha. Who's going to save us from you, Eveleigh?"

"Get lost, Malfoy!" Francis cried out, drawing out his wand.

"And if I don't I suppose you'll make me?" Draco taunted. "No need, Eveleigh. I don't want to get contaminated by you or the company you keep." He and his friends left but not before cuffing Neville who afterwards sped off to the opposite direction.

“Who were those with him?” Ron asked.

“Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle,” Francis told him. “That stupid idiot. Everyone knows his father’s a Death Eater. They’re just too scared to say anything about it. Too bad he left. I really wanted to try a spell on him.”

He and Ron got through a game of Gobstones before their compartment door slid open again. It was a girl this time. She looked their age with bushy brown hair and intelligent-looking brown eyes. One hand held a toad that croaked at them.

“Have either of you seen Neville?” she asked. “I found his toad.”

Francis and Ron shook their heads. “He went here earlier but left. You want to leave it with us in case he comes back again?”

“All right,” the girl agreed as she handed Francis the toad. “I’m Hermione Granger by the way.”

“Ron Weasley,” Ron introduced.

“Francis Eveleigh.”

The girl gasped as Francis said his name. He looked up questioningly. “You mean you’re the Francis Eveleigh?” she asked in a hushed voice. “I’m Muggle born so I’ve naturally only heard about you. But from what I gather, you’re the prophesied savior in the war that’s going on in the Wizarding World right now. It must be a very big deal. Goodness, everyone I’ve met so far seems to know you. It must be rather an honor to be the one to rid the world of this Dark Lord....”

Wouldn’t she stop talking? Ron thought gloomily as Hermione Granger took a seat in their compartment and continued chattering, oblivious to Ron’s scowl.

A few weeks later...

“Lucius Malfoy, Evan Rosier, Bellatrix Lestrange, George Mulciber, Regulus Black and Calvin Wilkes?” Stephen repeated.

“I am glad to discover you have a memory, boy,” the Dark Lord replied sarcastically.

“I’m supposed to go on a mission with them? Thran, I hate to break it to you but they’re probably plotting how best to make my death seem like an accident by now,” Stephen deadpanned.

Voldemort raised a brow. “Knowing you, you are more than capable of handling any attempt on your life. Just ensure that my Death Eaters do not die by your hands on this mission.”

Stephen rolled his eyes. “What exactly are we going to be doing?”

“At this very moment the Sorcerer’s Stone is hidden in Vault 713 in Gringotts. The mission is quite simple. Break in to Gringotts, get the Stone and return,” Thran informed him. “And I do not see why you are so worried. I’m not asking you to do anything at all. You will merely be there to observe.”

“The Sorcerer’s Stone,” Stephen’s eyes gleamed. “Grants immortality to the drinker of the Elixir of Life derived from it, doesn’t it?”

“No, boy, you are not allowed to drink the Elixir,” Voldemort growled. “I need my hands on the damn stone first. So just accompany my Death Eaters, watch how it is done and come back. Sounds simple enough.”

“It’s always the simple things that are the most complicated,” Stephen muttered under his breath.

Diagon Alley was empty at night. The streets were swept and tidied and the shops closed except for an occasional bar that was open. It was late into the night, nearly midnight, and Stephen stood in front of Gringotts letting the cool night wind blow through his robes. He shut his eyes for a moment. It had been so long since he had seen the Wizarding World. Ever since Thran took him to the manor when he was three, he had never been outside of it again. Until now. He had

only vague recollections of Diagon Alley and Gringotts from when he was young. Not much seemed to have changed.

Stephen didn't even stir when five figures appeared soundlessly behind him. "Where's Mulciber?" he asked without turning to look.

Malfoy, Rosier, Lestrangle, Black and Wilkes were taken aback. How can he tell? Evan Rosier thought with a frown. The Dark Lord's protégé was as much an enigma as the Dark Lord.

"He is... indisposed," Bellatrix curtly answered. "He will not be joining us. Where are your two other companions?"

Stephen shrugged. "Also indisposed," he sarcastically imitated her. "They have lessons."

"And you do not?" Bellatrix sneered.

She received a smile whose chill rivaled that of Voldemort's. "I've already completed mine."

"Bella, that is enough," Malfoy reminded her. "Come, let us get this done."

The six of them made their way to the double marble doors of Gringotts. Stephen examined the inscription written on the doors. Enter, stranger, but take heed... Cute, he thought absently. The Death Eaters altogether pointed their wands to the door and started to take apart the magical protection spells imbedded in it. It was numbing work, especially from Stephen's point of view. He rolled his eyes and stood back, watching them cast charm after spell after curse.

Thirty minutes passed and Stephen bit his lip. He remembered the first time Thran had tried to teach him wandless magic. This was how he must have felt, waiting for Stephen to get the stupid feather to float without his wand. He made a mental note to let up on Thran during his following lessons, now that he knew how tedious waiting was. The worst part of it all was that Stephen knew he could have done what the Death Eaters were trying to do in five minutes flat. Or even ten

seconds if he used his Darkness. But of course, no showing off for a first mission. Stupid rules.

Finally, they managed to open the door. Stephen followed in after them. Gringotts was huge and silent and empty. Like a tomb, the boy couldn't help but think.

"Bella, take Black and disable the alarm spells. Watch out for other protective spells they might have placed around here," Malfoy ordered. "Rosier, Wilkes, go find one."

"Is this all the security Gringotts has at night?" Stephen asked once he and Malfoy were alone.

"Of course not," Malfoy was unsure how he was to address the young boy. "Our spies and other Death Eaters have planted charms and spells here earlier in the day that were activated only tonight and they've taken out most of the protection. If we hadn't done that, it would take us all night trying to get to them all."

Clever. Stephen wondered whose idea it was. Maybe Death Eaters weren't completely brainless then.

Bellatrix returned with Regulus, who was still rather wide-eyed and nervous. "We have thirty minutes," she told Malfoy brusquely. "And then the alarms will reactivate. It was the best I could do."

Malfoy nodded. "We'll make do. Where in Slytherin's name did Rosier and Wilkes run off to?"

A moment later, the two Death Eaters strode back, one goblin clutched between them. The goblin was looking equal parts furious and equal parts scared. Stephen curiously stared at it. Why had Rosier and Wilkes taken a goblin?

"Whatever you came for, you will not get it," the goblin cackled at them.

“Be silent!” Rosier hissed. “Crucio!” The goblin made a sound somewhat like a scream and twitched about in agony before Rosier removed the curse. “Now if you’re lucky, you’ll cooperate with us and maybe we’ll let you live.”

“Let’s go,” Wilkes hurried them and they swiftly walked to the direction of the vaults.

With a little prodding and another round of Cruciatus, Rosier made the goblin named Griphook get two carts for the Death Eaters. Then they were rattling along the vaults of Gringotts. No one spoke. Speaking was quite a task, seeing that even their very teeth seemed to rattle inside their mouths. Stephen lazily observed the Death Eaters. Regulus Black seemed to be getting a green tinge to his face. Probably from all the dips and sharp curves. Stephen smirked. This mission was... interesting. He had certainly learned some things. And though he would never admit it out loud, it did feel good to be away from the manor for the first time in such a long while.

His eyes wandered over to the vaults. Recognizing one of them, he scowled. It was the Potter vault. He had been there once with Lily and James. Perhaps he would have time tonight to leave some sort of... surprise for them? He remembered Thran’s instructions and sighed. Observe only. Oh well, maybe next time.

It wasn’t long before both carts rattled to a stop in front of Vault 713. Griphook stood in front of the vault stone faced and refusing to help. Black approached the doors and reached out to touch them.

“Fool!” Malfoy stopped him just in time. “Do you want to be burned alive? No one but a goblin must touch those doors!”

“I didn’t know,” Regulus muttered, stepping away from the double doors.

“Hurry up and open the vault,” Wilkes ordered the goblin.

The goblin glared at all of them. “I will die before I help you obtain what it is you seek!” he declared.

“You will die regardless,” Malfoy informed him coolly. “But for now, we are in need of you. Imperio!”

Stephen had never been impressed by the Imperius Curse. He had an aptitude for throwing it off so after the first five curses, he could throw it off effectively. Aithinne had been very pleased. But now, he watched with interest as the Imperius Curse was cast on an ordinary, er, goblin. There was fire, a hint of a struggle in the goblin’s eyes before they turned absolutely blank. Maybe the Imperius Curse did have its uses after all.

“Open the vault,” Malfoy tonelessly ordered. At first, the goblin’s movements were slow and sluggish, as if he seemed to be fighting the curse. But Stephen could tell that Malfoy had the upper hand when Griphook ran his finger down the vault and the doors opened.

Stephen was about to enter the vault to finally catch a glimpse of the fabled Sorcerer’s Stone when an arm shot out to stop him. With lightning fast reflexes, he caught the arm and twisted it. Bellatrix cried out in pain.

“Yes?” he queried coldly, not letting go of her arm yet.

“Let me go!” she hissed. Stephen desperately wanted to curse her for her insolence but feeling he had proved his point, he let her go with a smirk.

“Stay out here,” she told him. “Malfoy, Black, Wilkes and I have to set up our escape Portkey and Rosier has to watch over the blasted goblin. Someone has to keep watch for other goblins or Aurors. This should have been Mulciber’s job if the oaf hadn’t gone and landed himself in St. Mungo’s. A Mandrake, I tell you...”

Stephen raised a brow. “My only purpose here is to observe,” he reminded her coolly.

“I am afraid you must do this. All four of us are needed to prepare the Portkey and I can’t possibly have you watching over the goblin,”

Malfoy smoothly interceded. "It is not a difficult task. If someone does come, go inside the vault and tell us. We will inform our Lord of your exemplary task once this mission has been completed."

How troublesome. Stephen knew they were planning something. He merely nodded. It would be interesting to see what they had planned. He watched as Malfoy and Lestrage entered the vault along with the others. Rolling his eyes, he set about on 'watch duty'.

Bellatrix gave Lucius a triumphant look before sauntering into the vault. Once all of them were inside, they gaped. The vault was empty.

"Where is it?!" Malfoy cried out angrily, turning to the goblin.

The goblin sneered at him. "Did you honestly think you could get it?"

"Crucio!"

They took turns casting the Cruciatus on Griphook. Rosier took out a small vial of clear potion. Veritaserum. They dribbled a few drops into the goblin's mouth.

"Where is the Sorcerer's Stone?" Malfoy hissed out the question.

"I don't know," the goblin's voice sounded choked. "This vault was emptied weeks ago!"

"Damn it all, we're too late!" Wilkes cried out.

Malfoy shook his head. "My Lord will not be pleased with this."

"Lucius!" Bellatrix called his attention. "It's been thirty minutes. The alarm spells are back. We need to go."

Malfoy nodded. "Avada Kedavra!" The goblin's lifeless body soon fell to the floor.

Lestrangle took out a cracked vase and held it out to them. It was the Portkey. They all touched one finger to it.

“Wait!” Black cried out. “The boy! Master’s protégé!”

At that moment, the alarm spells kicked in and the sound reverberated throughout the entire bank. Bellatrix smiled at Regulus. “Oh, that’s just too bad,” she simpered. “We shall simply have to tell Master that we were too late to save him!”

Black’s eyes widened. Before he could say anything more, they all felt the familiar tug to their navels and their world spun in black and white.

They reappeared in a graveyard. Their faces were troubled. Wilkes was the one who voiced out what the others were thinking.

“This mission has been a failure,” he rasped. “We didn’t even find out where they moved the stone to.”

Bellatrix tossed the cracked vase to the ground. “Oh, I don’t know, Calvin. I wouldn’t say this mission has been a total failure. We did get rid of the brat after all. Now we only have his two friends to worry about.”

Malfoy stopped in his tracks as something just occurred to him. “Idiot. Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!” Lucius swore.

Bella raised her brow. “What is it?”

Malfoy spun around. “Did it ever occur to you what would happen if that boy was caught by the Light?”

Bellatrix was silenced. “Surely...” her voice was hesitant. “Surely he doesn’t know that much.”

“He’s spent more time with the Dark Lord than all of us combined have,” Malfoy snarled. “Of course he knows that much!”

“Oh, Merlin,” Rosier groaned. “Don’t tell me we have to go back there to get him!”

“No, you don’t,” a familiar, boyish voice spoke up. The five Death Eaters looked behind them, shocked.

Sitting atop the statue of an angel was the boy. His ice green eyes peered at them amusedly from behind the black mask as their jaws dropped open and they merely stood there staring at him for the next five minutes.

“Did you honestly think you could get rid of me like that?” he laughed coldly. “You’ve underestimated me far more than you know.”

Malfoy swallowed the lump in his throat. He had been right all along... this boy, whoever he was, was no ordinary child. The Dark Lord would never have made him his protégé without a good reason. The boy was far powerful beyond his years. Lucius did not even want to contemplate how he had gotten out of there.

“Young Master!” Black cried out and fell to his knees in front of the boy. The boy merely raised a brow and ignored him. “Would you really have gone back for me, Death Eaters? Such loyalty is utterly touching.” The boy’s tone told them he found it anything but touching.

“Stand up, Black,” he ordered Regulus and the Death Eater stood trembling back to his feet.

He fixed all of them with that penetratingly icy green gaze. Bellatrix found that for once she couldn’t even find words to speak. The very air around them seemed to grow colder by the boy’s unspoken command.

“I’m not going to tell Thr – the Dark Lord about what you did to me tonight,” his voice was soft but venomous. “But take this as a warning. If you ever do anything as foolish as that again, I will make sure that the fate you suffer will be far worse than death!”

His voice seemed to echo in the empty graveyard and the words imprinted themselves into the Death Eaters' minds.

"Stupid Death Eaters," Stephen yawned. He had just gone back to the manor. It was three something in the morning and Marric and Mela had waited up for him. Surprisingly, Gal and Braon were there too. Stephen narrated the account of what had happened to them and the twins were outraged at what the Death Eaters had done to Stephen.

"So the location of the Sorcerer's Stone is once more unknown," Gal mused.

Stephen nodded. "Thran won't be too happy about that. I haven't seen him yet but Wilkes, Black, Lestrangle, Malfoy and Rosier are seeing him now," the boy smirked. "Now that I think about it, I wish I had gone there. Hearing their screams would be immensely satisfying."

A few minutes later, Stephen excused himself and went back to his rooms to sleep. There was a hard glint in Marric and Mela's eyes.

Braon sighed. "Please don't tell me you're thinking of doing something to avenge Stephen. He can take care of himself."

Mela blinked and smiled at Braon. "It won't be anything dangerous," she reassured. "Just... something vengeful enough."

Sure enough Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrangle, Calvin Wilkes, Regulus Black and Evan Rosier had nightmares for one full week after that incident. They woke up screaming in bed, dreaming about horrible twisted nightmarish ghouls. When they weren't asleep, they were feverish and throwing up everything that went into their stomachs. It only stopped when Braon intervened and told the twins that one week was enough penance time for what the Death Eaters had done.

Naturally, Stephen never found out.

TBC

Coming up: scrying and a bunch of random stuff

Chapter Sixteen: To See

Francis sighed contentedly. Ron and Hermione glanced over at him, surprised. The prophesied savior looked surprisingly happy this morning. It had been a month since they had started classes. The first week had been a tad bit awkward, especially as Ron had not appreciated the fact that Hermione had also been sorted into Gryffindor like him and Francis and was such a know-it-all. He'd made a few snide comments that the girl had unfortunately overheard and had reduced her to tears. It had taken nearly all of Francis' patience to get Ron to apologize but soon things had smoothed between Ron and Hermione and the three of them had become fast friends.

"What's up, Francis?" Ron asked.

Francis just gave him a smile. "I don't know. It's just that things have been really great the past few days. Snape isn't as vindictive as he usually is, McGonagall didn't assign us that much work and Charms is really fun. Aside from the fact that there's been no report of any raids or murders by Voldemort. It seems almost too good to be true."

At that moment, the breakfast owls swooped in. Hector, Francis' owl, flew over to the Gryffindor table with a long letter from Francis' parents. The prophecy child sighed. Without fail, his mum and dad always wrote every Monday, wanting to find out how he was and such. He started reading the letter.

"Francis, Ron, take a look at this," Hermione suddenly spoke up.

Both boys turned to her. She was holding a copy of the Daily Prophet and she showed to them the article that had caught her eye.

"Break in at Gringotts... nothing stolen... Death Eaters suspected... vault emptied earlier... wait. Vault 713?" Francis asked, incredulously, grabbing the paper and holding it close to him so he could read.

"Why? What is it?" Ron questioned.

Francis glanced around to make sure no one was listening and dropped his voice. "When mum and dad and me went to the vault to get some money, we met Hagrid. He came with us, said he was on an errand for Professor Dumbledore. Listen, the vault that Hagrid went to was Vault 713! I'm sure of that. The only thing he took out of there was a small package wrapped in brown paper."

"Was that what the Death Eaters were searching for?" Ron wondered.

"What could it possibly be," Hermione mused. "That You-Know-Who wants it too? I say it was lucky that it was emptied earlier."

"Lucky. Or Professor Dumbledore somehow knew that the Dark Lord was going to go after it," Francis said out loud.

They finished their breakfast a tad quieter than usual.

"Nicolas," Albus Dumbledore smiled as his friend made his way into the headmaster's office. "I thank you kindly for consenting to visit."

Flamel smiled at his friend. "Penny needed me out of the house anyway. Something about men being useless when it comes to cleaning or some such," Flamel chuckled. His smile was sincere but Dumbledore could see it didn't quite reach his eyes. The headmaster knew his friend was still suffering from nightmares of the time that he was used by the Dark Lord.

Tea and some crumpets appeared on a table before them. "Tea?" Dumbledore offered.

Flamel helped himself to a cup. They were like that for a while, slowly sipping the tea and talking about little things. It wasn't until half an hour later that the talk turned serious.

"Has it been moved here yet?" Nicolas Flamel asked Dumbledore, buttering a crumpet.

The headmaster nodded. "The spells and protective measures are also in place. You would admire Severus' and Minerva's job, Nicolas. Truly ingenious."

Flamel nodded. "Well, I'd say you took it out of Gringotts not a moment too late. That break in... Voldemort was undoubtedly behind it. It makes my heart rest easier, knowing the stone is now here at Hogwarts."

"Don't worry, Nicolas. I assure you the Dark Lord will not get the stone here," Dumbledore told him.

Flamel gave his friend a half-smile. "Now that that's been said, why don't you tell me exactly why I'm here, Albus? You have something on your mind, that I can tell."

Dumbledore was taken aback but then chuckled softly. "You could always tell whether I had something on my mind... this might be a bit hard for you, though."

Flamel raised a brow but nodded to Albus to continue. "Do you remember what you told me some time ago?" Dumbledore asked. "About seeing a child while with the Dark Lord?"

Nicolas' expression seemed to freeze but he nodded. "Yes. I remember. But I was not completely lucid back then, Albus. It might have just been my imagination or a hallucination."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "I fear that what you saw was actually real." Slowly, he began to tell Nicolas about the sudden appearance of the Dark Prince amidst the Death Eater ranks. Flamel listened in astonishment.

"But... a child!" Nicolas exclaimed. "Whatever for? Does Voldemort feel like he needs an heir?"

"No. Voldemort is after immortality. He needs no heir if he is to live forever. But why then would he take on a young child as his protégé?" Dumbledore mused.

Nicolas frowned. "From what little I can remember, there was nothing remarkable about the child at first. Although there was a familiarity between him and the Dark Lord. I remember that he had dark hair but that is it."

"Familiarity... I wonder how long that child has been with Voldemort. But more importantly..."

"Who is he?" Flamel finished for Dumbledore. "Do you suppose it could be the child of one of the Death Eaters?"

Dumbledore frowned. "Some Death Eaters – not all but some – would willingly give up their children to the Dark Lord. But knowing Voldemort, he would not take on just any child. You might think this strange Nicolas but I feel that that boy is not a child of one of the Death Eaters."

"Then who is he?"

"Who indeed?" Dumbledore murmured.

Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Stephen smirked as he aimed his wand at the thirtieth spell. A jet of his Darkness came out of his wand and hit the thirtieth spell, vaporizing the red light that had been speeding towards him a moment ago. Standing across from him, slightly out of breath were Marric and Mela. Gal was helping them, Braon was scrying, Aithinne was watching from the side and Scraithin was nowhere to be seen.

The Dark Lord was not there that day. For the past two months, Voldemort had been out of the manor a lot. Most of the time he had just given Stephen a spell or a curse or hex to learn while he was away. The assignments were by no means easy but Stephen managed to complete them. He knew though Thran never said that he was searching everywhere high and low for the location of the Sorcerer's Stone. Snape had gotten hell for that, Stephen remembered.

Today was another day that Thran wasn't here. The elementals had decided to let Marric and Mela help Stephen with his training. All the twins had to do was to cast spells at Stephen and all Stephen had to do was to destroy the spells before they reached him using his Darkness. It hadn't been easy at first, especially when he was still doing it with Thran. Voldemort could cast spells speedily so it wasn't always that Stephen could destroy them before they reached him. But with intense training, he had nearly mastered it. Not one spell that Marric and Mela cast hit him now.

Mela scowled. "I don't see why we need to keep on doing this seeing that we can't hit you anyway."

"I need you to practice your spellwork and Stephen needs to practice his Darkness," Gal told her. "This seemed the perfect way to achieve both goals. Take a rest first you three. It's been nearly three hours. You must be exhausted."

With a wave of his hand a flagon of pumpkin juice and three goblets appeared on the table. Stephen, Marric and Mela gratefully helped themselves. The drink felt cool down Stephen's throat. He was tired that was true, but training with his Darkness, while exhausting, was also exhilarating. He could feel his Darkness, his power, humming in his very veins. He flexed his fingers and they glowed black. There were so many ways to creatively mold his Darkness, to use it in his spellcasting. Stephen wondered why there had ever been a time when he had been afraid of this power. It was his to use and control.

He thought back to the day when Thran had offered for him to stay at the manor and be trained in exchange for the use of his powers. Thran had kept his end of the agreement. Stephen had every intention of keeping his. The Light side was never going to know what hit them.

After ten minutes, Gal spoke again. "All right, enough rest. Back to training. Marric, Mela, I want you to use more offensive spells. And try darker ones. Stephen, this time I want you to get rid of the spells without using your wand."

Stephen grimaced. It was harder to control his Darkness without his wand. But he merely pocketed the wand and nodded. He took in a few deep breaths and felt his Darkness surge throughout his body, to every hair on his head up till the end of his fingers and toes. He opened his eyes, which were now a deep dark black instead of the bright emerald green.

Marric felt disturbed on seeing Stephen's eyes. He had seen Stephen use his Darkness before and once or twice his eyes had even glowed black like this, especially when he was using huge amounts of his power, but it always unnerved Marric each time. Shaking off the feeling, he and Mela gripped their wands.

"Tollere!" Marric cast the first spell.

He and Mela shot spell after spell towards Stephen. His reaction time was somewhat slower than when he had been using his wand but it was impressive nonetheless. He merely pointed his finger at the spells and a jet black light of his Darkness shot from them to the spell, completely destroying the spell.

They trained for another two hours before Gal told them to stop. Which was just as well. All three of them were exhausted. Braon gave them a sip of her potion and they felt a little better. Marric watched as the blackness faded from Stephen's eyes and they returned to their normal green.

"What does it feel like?" he finally asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

Stephen turned to him with a questioning look. "What does what feel like?"

"That," Marric gestured. "Your magic."

"Like I can do anything at all. Like I have no limits. Like I can be anyone I want to be. It feels like infinity and pure power," Stephen's voice sounded a bit awed. "I can't really explain it beyond that. But it's the best feeling in the entire world."

A few weeks later...

“Is that an Everlasting Elixir?”

Braon nearly jumped when she heard Stephen's voice. She spun around and sure enough, the black-haired eleven year old was standing behind her smiling innocently. Braon couldn't help but think how much he'd improved. She had not even detected him coming up behind her.

“Did I surprise you?” Stephen grinned impishly.

Braon merely arched her brow at him. “Yes, this is an Everlasting Elixir. And what are you doing here?” she asked as she placed the small vial of blue potion into her private shelves.

“I'm bored,” Stephen declared. “Marric and Mela are with Scraithin and Gal. Thran isn't here. Again. I have nothing to do.”

“Didn't Master leave you something to do?” Braon asked, frowning.

Stephen rolled his eyes. “He told me to ‘invent a spell’. But that was four weeks ago!”

“I take it you've invented one then?”

Stephen nodded. Braon smiled. “Well why don't you try it out? Let me see.”

He pointed his wand at a small spider that had crawled to Braon's desk. “Engorgio.” The spider grew to the rough size of Braon's fist. Stephen pointed his wand at it again. “Dolere.”

It was like the Cruciatus curse, Braon saw. The spider twitched in spasms of pain. But the water elemental couldn't help but feel from the reaction of the spider that this was more pain than even the Cruciatus could inflict. She found herself fascinated as the spider twisted this way and that and imagined that if the creature could be screaming, it would be hoarse right now. It lasted for five minutes,

after which, Stephen removed the curse and shrunk the spider. Amazingly enough, it scurried away as if nothing had happened.

“What was that?” Braon asked, surprised.

“A variation of the Cruciatus. Take the pain you feel from the Cruciatus curse, multiply it a hundredfold and that’s how painful that curse was. The only difference is that that curse, unlike the Cruciatus, does not physically mark you. The pain transcends the physical, so the spider was fine when it left. But in many ways, it’s worse than the Cruciatus is,” Stephen explained.

“Master has certainly taught you well...” Braon said slowly.

“I know.” Stephen looked around Braon’s workroom and saw the small basin of water. “Is that a Pensieve?”

“No it’s not,” Braon walked over to it and motioned for Stephen to come over. “It’s a tool that I use for scrying.”

The basin was pure black and filled to the brim with water. But in the bottom of it, there was a small mirror lying in the center. Stephen glanced distrustfully at it. “Isn’t Divination a very inexact field?”

“It is,” Braon told him. “But I’m a natural Seer. All water elementals are. Even so, our powers to See are limited. Sometimes we see only vague, hazy images of the future. Other times they can be very clear.”

“So you See for Thran?” Stephen asked.

Braon smiled a bit. “I See many things, Stephen. Not all of them come to pass. Rarely do I tell Master what my visions are.”

“Why?” Stephen seemed surprised.

“Sometimes knowledge is very dangerous. Master understands this. I only tell him my visions if I am certain beyond a doubt they will come

to pass and if they will affect Master in any way. In all the time I have known Master, I have only told him of four of my visions.”

Stephen frowned, trying to internalize what Braon was saying. The water elemental gestured to the basin. “Would you like to try it?”

“I’m not a Seer,” Stephen protested. “All I’ll likely see is water.”

“I can lend you my abilities. Your aura is strong so you can use my Inner Eye well though you yourself are not a Seer,” Braon informed him.

“You can do that?” Stephen looked to her.

“Yes. You may see only hazy images but I want to give you a feel of how Divination is and why it is not a field that one so readily dismisses.”

Stephen hesitated for a while before nodding. “Just look into the mirror,” Braon instructed him.

Her cool hand settled on the nape of his neck and he felt Braon’s power washing over him like waves. Stephen frowned. It felt unfamiliar but it was soothing. He pushed his thoughts away and concentrated, staring into the mirror in the bottom of the basin. He felt Braon’s magic inside him. It was undeniably different than his own powers. It settled in his core and washed over his mind. His mind felt clearer than it had for a long time. Still he stared into the basin, into the water, into the mirror until there was nothing more in his world but that.

He forgot about the room, about Braon’s hand on his neck, about the fact that he was scrying. He only allowed himself to be. Stephen couldn’t know how much time had passed. But he began to see images. At first they were hazy. But the more he concentrated, the clearer they became.

He stared. Looking up at him from the mirror at the bottom of the basin was another boy. He was a lot older than Stephen, probably

fifteen. The boy had silky blond hair and gray eyes that looked up at him knowingly. Then his face broke into a smirk.

The image disappeared and another one took its place. Stephen saw himself, only older. He was standing in the middle of the room that didn't look like any room inside the manor. His eyes were closed and he was concentrating. It was like practicing with his Darkness, only this time his body was suffused with a white light.

That image also disappeared. This was replaced by the image of him, also older, dressed in black robes in the midst of a battlefield. There were bodies everywhere. His robes were covered in blood and tears were streaming from his cheeks. He fell kneeling and sobbing to the ground.

“Stephen?”

Stephen realized with a start that the images were gone and all that was left was the black basin. Braon had taken her powers from him and was now looking concernedly at him.

“I'm fine,” Stephen told her then frowned. His voice sounded very foreign even to his own ears.

“Whatever it was you saw,” Braon told him. “Remember that there is no absolution whether it will or will not come true.”

Stephen knew what she was telling him. You still have control over your own destiny.

The next night...

Stephen stood beside Thran watching as the last of his Death Eaters left the room. The Death Eaters were in high spirits. Why wouldn't they be? Their next mission called for bloodshed. Stephen noticed that that always gave them pleasure.

“You will be coming along on this next mission,” the Dark Lord informed Stephen, breaking the silence.

Stephen was a bit surprised at that. "Sure, Thran," he agreed.

"So will Marric and Mela," Voldemort smoothly added.

Stephen stared at him. "But I thought they weren't to go on any missions until – "

"I know what I said, boy. Aithinne tells me they are well trained enough. I want to see how well on this next mission."

"Am I still on observation status?" Stephen asked sarcastically.

He had been on four other missions after the incident with the Sorcerer's Stone and in all of them he had done nothing but watch. Stephen gleaned a lot but for the most part it was quite boring not to mention frustrating.

"Not anymore." Stephen was surprised when Voldemort said this. "You are more than ready, boy. But you will be with me throughout the entire mission. And you are still not allowed to use your Darkness."

Stephen brightened considerably. It was a step up. At least he could use magic now.

He looked at the map that was still pinned to the wall. The place where their next mission would take place was marked with a red cross. Stephen walked over and examined the island lying in the middle of the crashing ocean.

The wizard prison. Azkaban.

TBC

This chapter is more of a filler until the Azkaban escapade but I ended up giving spoilers. Yep, the 3 visions Stephen saw are spoilers to the story. I also realize he was supposed to 'invent' a spell but I was too lazy to come up with a good one. My apologies.

Coming up: escape from Azkaban

Chapter Seventeen: Halloween

The decoration was outstanding. Giant carved pumpkins hovered over the ground, the enchanted ceiling reflected the starry night sky and candles floated everywhere. It was the traditional Hogwarts Halloween feast. And as tradition dictated, it was magnificent. The teachers' robes were more festive than usual and the students had been given the choice to 'dress up in costumes', as Professor Dumbledore had stated with that twinkle in his eye.

A lot of things were troubling Francis' mind. Like what Hagrid had just slipped up last week when they were having tea with him about the 'thing' from Gringotts that was now here at Hogwarts. Francis desperately wanted to know what the thing was. He, Ron and Hermione had tried every possible method to cajole Hagrid into telling them but to no avail. Francis sighed. He decided that for tonight, he was going to forget about that and enjoy himself.

He turned to Ron who was dressed as a player from the Chudley Cannons. Francis nearly winced. Ron was incredibly... orange. Blindingly so, in fact. Francis had dressed himself as an Olympian god while Hermione was costumed as a Healer. Francis refrained from looking over to the Slytherin table. Some of them had costumed themselves as Death Eaters, causing a few gasps, screams and near pandemonium when they had first entered the Great Hall. The teachers had been scandalized but Francis was perplexed that Dumbledore seemed to find it slightly amusing, although he did ask if they could remove their masks once the feast began so as to refrain from disturbing their fellow students.

"C'mow Fran-shish. Lesh eat!" Ron's mouth was already full of roast beef and baked potatoes.

Francis nodded and enthusiastically began on his own plate. The house elves had outdone themselves, he thought blissfully with his first mouthful.

He continued shoveling in food while his eyes wandered over to the teachers. Then he frowned. Swallowing the mashed potatoes, he

turned to Ron who had a chicken drumstick in one hand and bread on the other.

“Where’s Snape?” he asked.

Hermione tugged at his toga and pointed. In the cheery atmosphere of the Great Hall, Snape – without a costume – slipped in unnoticed. Francis noticed he was limping slightly and his expression was foul. Francis frowned. Hermione’s eyes trailed him and Ron finally noticed and turned to look.

“Where d’you reckon he’s been?” Ron asked darkly.

“I’d really like to know the answer to that,” Francis muttered pushing away his plate, appetite forgotten.

He was Prisoner No. 93457. He had been Prisoner No. 93457 for two years although it seemed much longer than that, whenever he thought about it. But two years had been plenty of time. Time to get acquainted with the damp stone walls of his cell, with the dirty floor, the rusted metal bed, the single window too high for him to look out from. The only human company he’d had were the Ministry dogs and the Order of the Phoenix lackeys who patrolled by once in a while and shoved food into his cell. He’d had plenty of time to think. His heart burned with hatred at the person who had locked him up in here.

Oh, yes. His father would most certainly pay.

He knew he was getting out of here. Although it had been two years, he was certain beyond a doubt that his Master would come back for him. Whenever he thought this, a manic grin would always spread over his otherwise handsome face.

His Master was the only thing that mattered. The only person he lived for and if his Master willed it, the only person he would die for. His Master had saved him from his pathetic, wandering existence and shown him power and the true way.

Bartemius Crouch, Jr. thought back to the days when all he'd ever yearned for was his father's approval and attention. He had done that in every way he knew how. Prefect and then moving on to Head Boy, ahead in all his classes, earning twelve O.W.L.'s, star Chaser for his House Quidditch team and perfect son. But it had still not been enough. With Bartemius Crouch, Sr. it had never been enough. It was purely by chance that Barty Crouch, Jr. had been placed under the Imperius Curse by Rookwood, his father's fellow Ministry worker and spy for the Dark Order.

He had resisted at first. Merlin knew how hard he'd tried. But the more he saw of the Dark Order, and the more he saw of the Light side from the perspective of the Dark Order, the more he began to wonder whether what he had believed in all his life had been right. And when his father had been – as ever – too busy to even notice that his son had been placed under the Imperius Curse, Barty Crouch, Jr.'s soul finally fell into darkness.

He had managed to throw off the Imperius by Rookwood. After which he had approached the Dark Lord himself and asked to be marked as a Death Eater. He had never looked back since then.

As a member of the Dark Order, Crouch's cleverness and intelligence quickly moved him up the ranks. His father had never known. That was the first time Crouch had ever been glad for his father's indifference. His greatest accomplishment in the Dark Order had been bringing Nicolas Flamel to the Dark Lord. After that near miraculous feat, he had been inducted into the elite Inner Circle and had unofficially been considered Voldemort's right hand man.

It had been golden years before the traitor Corvin turned them in. It was the trial that had finally revealed all. His father, realizing what his son had become, had not even hesitated to throw him into Azkaban. If it had not been for his mother, he was sure his father would have sentenced him to death.

That bastard would pay for what he had done.

Barty Crouch, Jr. stretched in his cell. His Dark Mark had been hurting for the past week. With the signals his fellow Death Eaters

had given him, it seemed as though theirs had been, too. Something was about to happen.

Crouch mentally thought up the calendar in his head. Tonight was Halloween. He smiled grimly. How perfect.

He knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that his Master would be coming.

Marric and Mela stood beside Stephen and the Dark Lord. Any moment now, the signal would come and they would raid Azkaban by force. The twins were to go with the Death Eaters to draw out the wizards of the Law Enforcement and the members of the Order of the Phoenix outside of Azkaban. Although tonight was Halloween, security measures in Azkaban had not been lessened a bit. It would be tough. But the twins knew they were ready.

Marric surreptitiously adjusted the black mask that covered most of his face and cast a glance at Stephen. He was unreadable behind his black mask. But then again, he was unreadable even without the mask. His posture was relaxed and calm. Marric wondered how he did that.

This would be the first mission he and Mela had ever been to. Marric was determined to do his best and prove to the Dark Lord that he and Mela were worth the time and effort. Marric knew their powers were nothing compared to what Stephen could do. Which made him want to prove himself all the more.

They were standing on the edge of a cliff, looking out to the crashing ocean. Somewhere beyond those waves was the island where Azkaban was situated. The night stars had been covered by angry, black clouds and thunder occasionally flashed to reveal the black robes and white masks of the many Death Eaters gathered there with them. Somewhere behind the Death Eaters were the dementors along with a few members of the werewolf horde who had come along for the hunt.

The Dark Lord raised his hand and the murmurs ceased. They all looked expectantly to the north. And there it was. A faint glimmer of silver and green in the night sky. Small, yet still perfectly visible. The

Dark Mark hovering above Azkaban. The signal that the defenses and apparition wards had fallen.

The popping sounds of apparition filled the air as the Death Eaters began to apparate. Marric and Mela's eyes met but before they could apparate along with the others, Stephen spoke up.

"Marric, Mela," they turned to him. He was staying behind with the Dark Lord and some members of the Death Eater Inner Circle. They would apparate when the Light side had been drawn out of the fortress. He gave them a smirk. "See you later."

The twins didn't miss the underlying message. They returned the smirk and with two pops they were gone.

Stephen turned his eyes to the spot where the Dark Mark glimmered in the night sky. The battle had just begun.

Their roles had been planned down to the last detail with terrifying efficiency. And it was also with the same efficiency that the Dark Lord had ruthlessly cut off any possible sources of leaks. Which was why when they launched the attack, the Light had no idea at first of what was happening. Then when reality began to dawn, they had tried to call for backup.

Only to find that their fireplaces had been blocked against flooding, their emergency Portkeys had been stolen, their owls dead, one-way apparition wards set up and broomsticks were gone. Then the fun had really begun for the Death Eaters.

Marric and Mela had gone with Lucius Malfoy's squad. Each Death Eater squad had been assigned a section of the prison to exterminate of Light wizards. It had been difficult to get their hands on a blueprint, but well worth it once they had had it.

The normally quiet as a tomb prison was now full of noise. Multicolored jets of light from different spells flashed everywhere. There were dying cries of the Light wizards and the pained cries of some Death Eaters who had been wounded in the fray. Some prisoners had taken the opportunity to escape from their cells, and

were now running about, delirious with the joy of freedom. But none of them were the prisoners that the Dark Order had come for.

Mela frowned, hearing footfalls behind her. She spun around. "Avada Kedavra!" The wounded Light wizard who had thought to come up behind her barely had time to widen his eyes in surprise at hearing her voice behind the mask when he fell dead.

She eyed him for a moment and deliberately walked over him, searching for her brother. Somehow, she had gotten separated from Marric and Malfoy's squad in all the chaos. Not that it was a problem. The other Death Eaters recognized her and quickly scurried out of her way. She and Marric had not been on a mission before this one, true, but Stephen had been on missions and his reputation had quickly spread among the Death Eater ranks.

Mela was only beginning to learn Legilimency but whenever she practiced it with this lot, it always amused her to hear their thoughts about the Dark Prince, as Stephen was now widely known. As he should be.

"Expelliarmus!"

Mela cursed and quickly drew up a Shield Charm. "Protego."

The red light of the Disarming Charm bounced off hers easily. She quickly sought the stupid idiot who had cast the spell with irritated amber eyes. She saw that he was a member of the Law Enforcement team. Barely in his twenties. Probably a trainee, Mela thought, seeing the fear that was mixed with bravery in his eyes. Pity. He had courage, she would give him that much. And he had probably been trained well. But she had been trained better.

Mela began casting a series of hexes his way. He was good. He managed to dodge most of them but finally got caught up in the Full Body Bind hex. He toppled over to the floor. She sighed before waving her wand and finishing him off. Normally, she would have had her fun with him first. Maybe tortured him a little. Hearing people scream was somewhat fun. They had different voices and comparing

the pitches and tones of their screams was a fascinating thing. But she needed to find Marric.

Mela continued her search. Azkaban was divided into the men's prison and the women's prison. She heard female screams from the latter and wrinkled her nose. The Death Eaters of the Outer Circle were a rather crude bunch. She had no illusions as to what was going on in the female prisons right now. She knew some of the Death Eaters merely raped for the fun of it.

The werewolves were also gorging themselves. She could smell the metallic tang of blood and veered away from that direction. Although she was loath to admit it, seeing the werewolves eat did give her chills sometimes. She felt a hand on her shoulder and quickly turned, her wand up and ready.

It was Marric. She narrowed her eyes. "You caught me by surprise," she told her brother.

He smirked at her. "Come on, Malfoy's concerned to death about you. Worried that the Dark Lord might do something to him if he lost two of the Dark Lord's precious protégés."

Mela followed him. They came to a blank stone wall. Malfoy's squad, Wilkes' squad and Dolohov's squad were gathered around it. It seemed to Mela like they were casting spells at the wall in turn, but nothing was happening.

"What's going on?" Mela asked Marric.

"The people from the Order of the Phoenix sealed off this part of the prison," Marric explained. "They must have guessed what we were after. Anyway, this lot is trying to get it to open and still not succeeding. They'd better hurry, though. Stephen and Master are going to be here any moment."

Mela nodded and watched as the Death Eaters continued in their futile effort to get through the wall.

“Cremavi!” The few Light wizards who had surrounded them upon apparition screamed as blue flames licked their bodies. In seconds, only a fine ash remained where there had been live human beings.

Stephen knew it unnerved Thran’s Death Eaters to see him using such powerful magic. Which was precisely why he used it as often as he could. He saw the barest hint of an approving expression on Thran’s face before they began to move inside of Azkaban.

The Death Eaters quickly bowed as they passed. Stephen saw they had done a fine if somewhat messy job. The great doors to the prison had been blasted open. Stephen saw a dementor giving a Light wizard a kiss as they entered. He frowned. Just because dementors were their allies didn’t mean he had to like them. As they walked through the corridors, there were barely any Light wizards there. The plan had worked, Stephen thought.

As they were ascending a staircase, Stephen saw Greyback coming out of one of the cells, back in his human form now, licking his lips. He bared his teeth in a grin to them before he bowed down to the Dark Lord. The blood staining his teeth was a bright red.

Whenever they came upon a Light wizard who had somehow managed to survive and was about to attack them, Thran would let Stephen take care of it. Not that the boy minded. He just wondered why Thran would rather he do it than one of his Death Eaters. But Stephen couldn’t help but feel like he was somehow being evaluated. Based on Thran’s reaction though – what little of it he could glean – he was doing pretty well.

Soon, they reached a group of wizards gathered around what looked like a dead end. Stephen frowned. That dead end should have been a corridor leading to the cells of the prisoners they were after. He saw Marric and Mela among the other wizards. The twins immediately joined him.

“Stand aside, Death Eaters,” the Dark Lord hissed. “Amovere.” A jet of blue light shot from the Dark Lord’s wand and hit the wall.

Instantly, the stone wall crumbled and disintegrated. Instead of a dead end, they were faced with a corridor leading into darkness.

The screaming started near midnight. An anticipatory gleam sparked in Crouch's eyes and he drew himself up from the hard metal bed to a sitting position. He could hear the incantations yelled out through the usually silent prison. He knew his fellow Death Eaters could hear as well. Their prisons were different from the normal ones. Theirs were much more heavily enforced with spells and magic, making their cells very difficult to escape from. If Crouch could have done it, he would have been out of there by now.

His hands had not held a wand for two years. They itched to be out there with the other Death Eaters, terrorizing and killing, carrying out the Dark Lord's wishes. Crouch calmed himself. Soon. He would get his wish soon enough.

The cacophony of chaos lasted for the better part of two or more hours. Then all of a sudden, everything silenced. Crouch frowned, wondering what had happened. He stood up and peered out of the bars of his cell door. Nothing. Only darkness. It came to him. Of course.

The Order of the Phoenix had locked them in here, probably guessing correctly that it was these heavily guarded Death Eaters that the Dark Order had come for. Crouch smirked. He knew his Master could get them out. His waiting didn't last long. The sound of a wall crumbling, and then light shone through when a voice spoke out the spell "Lumos." It wasn't as noisy now as it had been a while ago, but he could still hear the sounds emanating throughout Azkaban. And based on those sounds, he knew which side had won.

He sat back, folding his arms over his chest and waited.

A moment later, his door was blasted open. Crouch waited until the debris cleared and two figures stepped into his cell. He looked up to them. Even with their masks on, he could tell who the two Death Eaters were. Bellatrix Lestrange and Antonin Dolohov.

"You took long enough," he drawled, pulling himself up.

Lestrangle gave him a once over. Barty Crouch had definitely grown thinner and much more gaunt during his stint in Azkaban. But on him, it looked good. It emphasized the strong cheekbones and the set of his face. The eyes though burned as bright as Bellatrix remembered them.

“There were some delays,” Bellatrix replied. Dolohov handed him a spare set of robes and a white mask.

Crouch pulled the robes over his prison rags and fitted the mask on to his face. He smiled. All he lacked now was a wand. Dolohov nodded.

“Let us go. The Dark Lord awaits.”

Crouch followed Lestrangle and Dolohov out of his cell. He saw that the cells of the other Death Eaters were empty, too. He reveled in the freedom that had been lost to him for two years. The two other Death Eaters led Crouch out of the corridor. They emerged into a spacious hall where, Crouch saw, most of the Death Eaters had gathered. The dementors were hovering a distance away from them.

“Some things have... changed since you were away,” Bellatrix murmured into his ear.

Crouch frowned, wondering what she meant about that. He saw one of the Death Eaters sneer as he passed and he knew that the person was Manlius Parkinson. Parkinson had always hated Crouch for ascending so fast to become a member of the Inner Circle and Voldemort’s right hand. He never lost a chance to put Barty Crouch down. He was smiling right now. Crouch knew there was something between Bellatrix’s statement and Parkinson’s smile that made him wary. But what was it?

He and the other Death Eaters who had just been set free proceeded towards the Dark Lord and bowed down to him.

“Williamson, Seinfeld, Brennan, Emory, Wayliss, Danvers, Harcroft, Pennington, Rachis,” the Dark Lord named each one of them. “And

Crouch... my most loyal. It has been a long two years, has it not? I wonder, whether your allegiance lies with me still."

There were murmurs of 'Of course, Master' and 'Yes, my Lord' as each one of them crawled forward and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes. The Dark Lord looked each of them speculatively in the face.

"I truly hope so, Death Eaters... Crouch is the only one among you whose loyalty is ever unwavering," Voldemort met their eyes. Some of the Death Eaters shivered but Crouch hid a smirk. His position in the Death Eaters was as secure as ever. Why then did the smile on Parkinson's face seem to grow bigger?

Crouch turned back to the Dark Lord and was shocked. From behind Voldemort emerged three figures. Children, Barty Crouch noted. Wearing the black robes of the Dark Order and wearing black masks. They stepped forward.

Crouch saw that the child standing in the middle had words etched on his mask. Atrum Proceris. Dark Prince, Crouch mentally translated. He looked up to the glittering green eyes of the Dark Prince who was also looking back at him.

Barty Crouch, Jr. loathed the boy on sight.

Marric noted that Stephen seemed a tad quieter tonight. They had just returned to the manor after the mission in Azkaban and Marric was dead tired. The mission had been exhilarating, though. He wondered why Stephen wasn't more pleased.

Stephen paused at the doorway to his bedroom. "Did you see him?" he asked.

Marric was confused and turned to his sister who looked equally confused as well. "See who?" Marric questioned cautiously.

"Crouch." Stephen spat the name out.

"Hm. Isn't he the one that they consider to be Master's right hand?" Mela asked curiously.

“Yes.”

“Well what about him?” Marric asked.

Stephen let out a long breath. “I really don’t know,” he paused as if searching for the right words. “I don’t like him.” Coming from someone else, that would have sounded like the statement of a petulant child. But Marric and Mela knew Stephen.

The Dark Prince shook his head. “Forget about it. I’m going to bed.”

He shut the door behind him. But he didn’t go to bed. Stephen stayed awake, staring into the sparking fire, at the yellow flames that licked the air. He felt very confused. The moment he had looked at Barty Crouch, he had felt an instant hatred towards the Death Eater. It was instinctive, primal... irrational. Crouch was no threat to him, Stephen thought scowling. Why then did he dislike him so much?

Thran had taught Stephen that irrational emotions were a vulnerability. Stephen had laughed and replied that weren’t all emotions irrational? Thran had told him that he would understand someday.

Stephen still didn’t understand. He snapped his fingers and flicked a speck of his Darkness into the fireplace. Immediately, the fire went out, enveloping his room into darkness. He closed his eyes but could still find no sleep.

“Who was he, Bella?” Crouch growled at Lestrage.

Bellatrix shook her head. “Two years can be a long time. That was the Dark Prince. He and the two others with him are Master’s protégés.”

Crouch was stunned motionless. “Protégés?”

“Yes,” Lestrage tartly replied. She began telling him about the time when Voldemort had introduced the three to the Dark Order. He was quiet throughout the whole time she was talking. “I suppose that’s why Parkinson looked so pleased. He supposed that with the Dark

Prince here, you won't remain the Dark Lord's favorite any longer," Bella finished.

"But who are they?" he snapped.

She gave him an amused look from underneath heavy-lidded eyes. "That is the great mystery. Nobody knows who they are or where they come from. Nobody even knew they were there until the Dark Lord introduced them."

Barty Crouch narrowed his eyes. Lestrangle could almost see the cogwheels of that brilliant mind turning. "Don't plan what I think you're planning to do," she told him. "Believe me, it's been tried."

She recounted the Gringotts incident. "They're different. They're not ordinary, far from it in fact. You tend to walk softly around them."

"Is that so..." Crouch smiled tightly. "We'll soon see about that." They were brewing a Warming Solution. Winter was fast approaching and Snape had vindictively drawled that if they didn't want to freeze while working in the dungeons, they had better get their potions right. Francis frowned. He had tried working with Neville – who was absolutely hopeless at Potions – but Snape had swooped down on them with a vicious smile and paired off Francis with Hermione and Ron with Neville.

Hermione and Francis exchanged helpless glances. The two already knew how to brew the potion but Neville and Ron together? They might as well prepare for chaos. Francis scowled at Snape as he lit the cauldron and Hermione went to get the ingredients.

As Francis laid out the ingredients Hermione had brought, he saw Draco Malfoy move his and Blaise Zabini's cauldron closer to Francis and Hermione's. There was a mean little smile on Malfoy's face. Anything that made Malfoy happy couldn't be good, Francis thought darkly.

For the first hour of Potions nothing out of ordinary happened – except maybe Neville and Ron's potion emitting black and gold

sparks. Then during the second part, when Snape stepped out of the room for a spell as they were stirring their potions, Malfoy inched closer to Francis until he was nearly crowding the boy to the cauldron.

Francis growled. "Watch it, Malfoy! What's the matter, you don't have enough space where you're standing?"

Malfoy smirked at him. "You talk tough, Eveleigh, but for a prophesied savior, you're completely useless aren't you?"

The room was unusually quiet all of a sudden, something that so far only Snape and McGonagall had been able to achieve. Everyone's attention was divided between stirring their potions and sneaking glances at what promised to be a full-fledged fight.

"What in Merlin's name are you on about?" Francis asked frustrated.

Malfoy just tossed something at him that Francis managed to catch at the same instant Snape walked into the room. Francis hid it in his robes but the moment Potions was over, he, Ron and Hermione walked swiftly away from the classroom. Francis pulled out the thing Malfoy had thrown. It was a copy of the Daily Prophet. He glanced at the headline and his complexion turned ashen.

"Francis? You okay?" Ron asked. Hermione grabbed the paper from him and smoothed it out.

Massacre in Azkaban it read. The photo showed the bodies of Light wizards lying outside the famed prison with the Dark Mark hovering in the background. Hermione's jaw dropped as she skimmed through the article.

"No warning whatsoever, no survivors, and most prisoners, including heavily guarded Death Eaters gone," Hermione whispered as she folded up the paper. "This is horrible! And from Malfoy! This is absolutely disgusting!"

Ron's face had turned a bit peaked as well. He and Francis exchanged a look. Hermione would not understand. Ron and Francis

had grown up amidst members of the Order of the Phoenix. The same members whose dead faces were looking out at them from the garishly moving picture in the newspaper.

Francis suddenly bolted and ran off. Hermione would have followed him but Ron's arm shot out to stop her. He shook his head. He knew Francis needed to be alone right now. Malfoy's statement about his being useless had hit a nerve, Ron knew.

"It must be hard," Hermione said after a while, biting her lip. "To carry the hopes of the entire Wizarding World on your shoulders."

TBC

I was researching Death Eaters on the net some time ago when I came to this sort of quiz site that tells you which Death Eater you most are. I was most like Barty Crouch, Jr. Surprising really, because he's one of my favorite Death Eaters. From this chapter onward he will be playing a somewhat large role in the story. Read and review guys.

Coming up: preparations (for what, you ask? Wait for the next chapter, then! Evil laugh)

Chapter Eighteen: Meetings and Revelations

“Lorum Ignis!” Stephen cried out. The whip struck forward, burning everything in its path. When it reached the Dark Lord, Voldemort merely whipped out his own wand and cast the water version of the whip. When it met with Stephen’s fire whip, there was a flash of white light and both whips disappeared. Stephen stared at Thran, awed. “How’d you do that?”

“The fire and water forms of the whip are elemental opposites. They cancel each other out,” Voldemort explained calmly. “As do the air and earth forms. Hurry up and continue.”

Stephen flexed his arms and waved his wand again. “Lorum Aqua!” This time the water form of the whip burst out. He gave his wand a flick and added, “Glacies.” The water form turned to sharp ice. Stephen handled the whip easily. At a nod from Thran, he dissolved the whip and waved his wand for the next form.

“Lorum Herba.” The whip turned into a thick vine reinforced with long, wicked thorns that were oozing out poison. Flecks of the liquid poison splattered, hissing and melting the spots on where they landed. Stephen could feel Thran’s penetrating red gaze on him, observing and assessing his every movement. Stephen handled magic excellently now. So well that as the months wore on, Voldemort found fewer and fewer things to correct in his pupil.

After banishing the earth form, Stephen raised his wand for the last form of the whip. “Lorum Ventus!” Sharp air cut in the form of a whip as Stephen successfully demonstrated the whip’s air form. He brandished it around for a few moments, then banished it. He looked expectantly at Thran who had the usual unreadable expression on his face.

“You have to refine your control of the whip,” was all Voldemort said. Stephen suppressed a sigh. So much for expecting praise.

“This is all for today. Make sure to practice on your Darkness,” the Dark Lord told him. Stephen nodded. “We will not be having your lessons tomorrow. Instead, you will sit in at a Death Eater meeting.”

Stephen’s brows shot up. A meeting? “The Sorcerer’s Stone is hidden in Hogwarts,” Thran continued. “Tomorrow we will plan on how to get it out. I want you there. You can learn a thing or two about strategies.”

“Sure,” Stephen replied, then hesitated. “Hey, Thran. I was... experimenting the other day. I wanted to find out what happens if you fuse all four forms of the elemental whip.”

Thran shot him a look. “And you found out what?” he asked archly.

Stephen directed his wand at a nearby table. “Lorum Fundere.” A white whip struck out. Stephen flicked it onto the table and there was a blinding flash of light. When they could look again, the table was completely destroyed. The furniture near it had either been sliced by the wind, covered in ice, incinerated by fire or melted with acid. Voldemort was taken aback. It carried all four elements, yet was stronger than any of the four.

“That’s what happened,” Stephen indicated with a grin. “Pretty cool, isn’t it?”

“Ingenious,” Thran said with a hint of sarcasm. “Tomorrow. Do not forget.”

“When do I ever?”
Order of the Phoenix Headquarters...

Most of the members of the Order of the Phoenix were there already. They were milling about the huge room, greeting acquaintances, exchanging gossip and generally making it seem as though the meeting was nothing more than a large family reunion, the way everyone was smiling at everyone else. It wasn’t though. There was an unmistakable undercurrent in the air. It was charged with urgency and grief. The Order’s losses from the Azkaban massacre had been

horrifying. Many kept up the pretense of happiness but it was a hollow sham.

Daedarus Wycksworth was sitting on a corner all by himself and sipping some tea, his expression stony. Lily Potter noticed and made a move to approach him but a gentle arm stopped her. It was Alice Longbottom. She shook her head.

“Don’t, Lily.”

“What happened?” Lily whispered.

“His son was one of the people guarding Azkaban that night,” Alice said softly. “He’s dead.”

“Oh!” Lily gasped, tears gathering in her eyes. “How horrible! First his wife then his son.” Seeing Alice’s confused look, she continued. “His wife was killed two years after their son was born. He was never the same since then. Most people say it turned him bitter.”

“The poor man,” Alice whispered. “He deserves better. And after everything he’s done...”

Alice and Lily quietly moved away from Wycksworth. Not long afterwards, Professor Dumbledore came in, followed by Severus Snape, Keelan Eveleigh and Minerva McGonagall. It was the first time the Order had ever seen the Hogwarts headmaster look his age. The massacre at Azkaban had apparently affected everyone. The room quieted down and everyone found a seat as Dumbledore went forward.

There was a long and heavy pause before he began to speak. “We all know what has happened. It has affected us one way or another for the people who died were our family, friends or even just acquaintances. People who were ruthlessly murdered by Lord Voldemort.” There was an uneasy stir at the Dark Lord’s name. “Tonight, we do not just honor their memories but remember their bravery as well. I want you all to know what took place that night. Keelan?”

Keelan Eveleigh looked like he had not slept in months. There were huge circles under his eyes as he took Dumbledore's place in front. Wycksworth clenched his hands and narrowed his eyes upon seeing Keelan.

"We'd known for some time that the Dark Order had been planning to break in to Azkaban," Keelan began, his voice slightly scratchy. "But they held the mission with such secrecy that not even Severus knew the exact day. So we merely increased security in Azkaban by asking the Ministry to let us put a some of our people there and adding more enchantments to the cells of the imprisoned Death Eaters."

"Then how come we weren't warned when the actual attack came?" Sirius Black asked in a flat voice, eyes straying towards Snape who balled his fists.

"The Dark Lord invented an enchantment that forces a person to keep a certain secret that they know and tell it to no one for a short period of time. The concept is similar to but less powerful than the Fidelius Charm. You-Know-Who used it on all his Death Eaters so Severus could not warn us of the attack until it was too late. When we arrived there..." Keelan paused, banishing the images that suddenly swarmed in his mind. "No one was left alive."

"And I suppose you're consoling yourself by saying you did all you could," a cold voice suddenly sneered.

Everyone looked towards who had spoken, aghast at the statement. Daedarus Wycksworth stood up shakily, his face white and his eyes blazing. "If you had moved faster... if you had gotten there in time, then they would still be alive!"

"Daedarus!" Dumbledore spoke sharply. "That is enough!"

"No, it is not!" spittle flew from Wycksworth as he advanced slowly to a frozen Keelan Eveleigh. "You think you're one of us, Eveleigh? You think you're going to erase what you've done by helping us now?"

Well you're not! You killed my son! You killed Phillip just as sure as you killed my wife!!!"

"Daedarus!" Felicity Prewett gasped. "Keelan didn't kill Phillip and he most certainly did not kill your wife!"

"Oh no?" Wycksworth's face was twisted into a malevolent sneer. "He was one of them once. He was a Death Eater! I saw him with the other Death Eaters that night and I know he killed my wife!"

All the color had fled from Keelan's face and there were a few more gasps among the others.

"Daedarus, sit down!" Dumbledore's voice was sonorous. But it stopped Wycksworth in his tracks. He looked wildly around and ran from the room. Everyone else was stunned motionless.

Everyone was silent. "Dumbledore, is it true?" the high-pitched voice of Willy Wagner rose up. "Was he... really a Death Eater?"

Dumbledore fixed everyone with his sharp, penetrating light blue gaze. "Yes. Keelan Eveleigh was a Death Eater. But he has willingly renounced his association with the Dark Lord even before Francis was born. He is one of us now, as I am sure you all know and he has proven his loyalty time and time again. I have no reason to mistrust him."

"Keelan's saved Arthur's life," Molly Weasley spoke out in defense. "Does it matter that he was a Death Eater before? He's different now. Look at him. Look at Miranda and Francis."

Muttering broke out of the congregated witches and wizards. Most of them gave Keelan warm smiles that held the hint of an apology. A few of them though, gave Keelan dark glares.

"That is enough," Dumbledore spoke out. "There is another urgent matter that we must discuss tonight. That of the Sorcerer's Stone."

Silence fell over the Order again. Dumbledore continued, "As you all well know, the Stone is hidden here at Hogwarts. The teachers, myself included, have cast enchantments guarding the stone. But I fear this will not be enough. The Dark Lord is planning to come here and take the stone."

Mutters rose again from the multitude. Dumbledore waited for them to subside. "If he does put this plan into action then it jeopardizes the students' lives as well. We will need more to guard the stone."

"When do you think Voldemort," people flinched. "Will try to take the stone, headmaster?" James Potter asked.

"Severus has said that the Dark Lord will take it one week from now. We must be ready to face him. If it can be avoided altogether, I would much rather that it were. I do not wish to put the students at risk."

"How are they planning to get into Hogwarts?" Remus Lupin asked.

"Based on our information, one of the Death Eaters has found a secret passageway that leads into the castle," Dumbledore replied. James, Sirius and Remus exchanged looks. "Therefore, I think it would be wise if members of the Order were to patrol the castle throughout the week."

Hands were immediately raised into the air. Dumbledore picked out twenty or so people to go to Hogwarts. "All right. Now that that is settled, there is one more thing you need to know about."

The headmaster waved his wands and words started to form in the air in loopy, golden letters. *Atrum Proceris*. Dumbledore looked expectantly at them.

"*Atrum Proceris*," Sirius lazily spoke up. "Translated, it means 'Dark Prince'."

Dumbledore and Snape exchanged looks. "Severus?" the headmaster entreated. "Would you do the honors?"

“We’re lost,” Hermione stated flatly, looking accusingly at Ron. “You said you knew a shortcut to the Astronomy Tower!”

“I do, okay?” Ron said defensively. “We must’ve just taken a wrong turn or something. I’m sure we can find our way back easily!”

“Or get even more lost,” Francis muttered as Ron led the way across the dark corridors.

Francis looked around uneasily. He had never been in this part of the castle before. In fact, it looked as though nobody had been in this part of the castle before. The floors were slightly dusty and the walls were cobwebbed. There weren’t even any statues or paintings in sight.

“So, uh, how long before we find our way back?” Francis asked.

“Not long. I hope,” Ron gulped.

Suddenly, Hermione stopped in her tracks. “Do you two know where we are?” she asked in an odd voice.

Ron and Francis looked questioningly at her. There was a panicked glint in her eye. “We’re in the third floor corridor. The forbidden third floor corridor.”

“Huh?” Ron asked dumbly. “Why’s it forbidden?”

“I don’t know, but you obviously weren’t listening to Professor Dumbledore at the Welcome Feast were you?”

Ron and Hermione turned to Francis only to find him pasty-skinned. “Did you hear that?” he whispered hoarsely. The three fell silent and heard it. The unmistakable yowl of a cat.

“Mrs. Norris!” Ron hissed. “Let’s move!”

Quickly, the three of them ran as though running for their lives. They heard the screech of the cat as it heard them and went in hot pursuit. Francis looked back to see how far away Mrs. Norris was when –

“Oof!” he bumped straight into Ron.

“It’s a locked door!” Ron moaned. “Dead end! Just our luck. Filch’ll skin us alive!”

“Not if I can help it,” Hermione said grimly. “Alohomora!”

The lock clicked and the door creaked open. Francis threw Hermione a grateful look as the three of them sped inside and locked and bolted the door.

“Well that was close,” Ron sighed. For once, Hermione nodded wearily in agreement.

“Erm, Ron? ‘Mione?” Francis’ voice sounded a little strangled as they turned curiously to him. “Maybe it’s time we left?”

Francis’ eyes were rooted on something that, as Ron and Hermione turned to look, emitted a ferocious growl. Three screams rose into the air and they managed to dash away just in time before the three headed dog got to them.

“What the hell was a monster like that doing there?” Ron cried out horrified, when the three of them were safely back in the Gryffindor common room.

“At least we know why it’s forbidden,” Francis offered.

“You mean to say you two didn’t see what it was standing on?” Hermione asked archly.

“Standing on?” Francis questioned. “What d’you mean, ‘Mione?”

“It was standing on top of a trapdoor,” Hermione said.

“A trapdoor and a three-headed beast? Let’s see, who should we be asking about that?” Ron said sarcastically.

Francis and Hermione realized it at the same time. "Hagrid."

The whole scene reminded Stephen of the story of King Arthur and his knights of the round table. There was a huge, black round table in the circular room where Thran usually met with his Death Eaters and that was where Stephen was currently seated. Thran sat at the center, with Stephen on one side and Crouch on the other. Select members of the Inner Circle sat around the table, backs ramrod straight.

Underneath the table, Nagini was gliding about and hissing contentedly. Stephen would have said hello to her but he had caught the look Thran gave him just in time. The Dark Lord did not want the Death Eaters to see the Dark Prince hissing about to his snake.

"Very well, Death Eaters," Voldemort stated in his usual cold voice. "Let us begin. Crouch, you say that you know a way into the castle?"

"Yes, my Lord. I discovered it myself and I am quite certain that no one uses it."

"Any reason why you are so certain of it?" Parkinson interjected with a mean little smile.

"The fact that it is caved in and therefore no one can use it," Crouch retorted smoothly.

"If no one can use it, how do you expect us to be able to pass?" Malfoy archly questioned.

"No need to worry yourself, Lucius," Crouch sneered. "I'll take care of that trivial detail."

"Severus," Voldemort suddenly interrupted. "What are the enchantments that Dumbledore has placed with regards to the stone?"

"He asked all us teachers to set barriers of our own, my Lord, and unfortunately has also ordered us to tell no one of the defenses we

installed. He is the only one who knows all of the enchantments. I am quite certain, though, that Quirrel has merely brought in a troll.”

There was a pause. “I’m disappointed in you, Severus. First the Sorcerer’s Stone and now this. Your little failures are beginning to... annoy me.”

Stephen watched as Snape’s eyes widened behind the mask before the Cruciatus hit him. The boy found it admirable, the way Snape bit his tongue so as not to scream but the pain won in the end. The potions master let out a loud scream that reverberated in the room before Voldemort removed the Cruciatus. Snape was pale and trembling afterwards but merely bowed his head to Voldemort.

“I will not disappoint anymore, my Lord.”

“I trust not,” Voldemort hissed. “Will there be members of the Order there?”

“Yes, my Lord. After the break in at Gringotts, they expect you will go after the Stone once more,” Snape hurriedly replied.

“Of course. Dumbledore would not want to risk the lives of his prized students,” the Dark Lord sneered. “I suppose we shall have to bring more Death Eaters then. Greyback and his companions perhaps... Dolohov, Lestrangle. Is the distraction ready?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“And you are certain he will fall for it?”

“We assure you, my Lord,” Rudolphus Lestrangle intoned. “That come that night, Dumbledore will be nowhere within Hogwarts.”

“Most excellent.”

Stephen frowned as he sensed something probing at his mindblocks. He turned his head slightly and saw Crouch, looking intently at him from Thrane’s other side. There was no doubt about it. Crouch had

tried to enter his mind with the use of Legilimency. Stephen narrowed his eyes at the Death Eater. Not even Marric and Mela dared do that to him. He concentrated and his eyes met those of Barty Crouch.

Suddenly, he was inside Crouch's mind. The Death Eater's memories overwhelmed him. But Stephen gritted his teeth and held on to his control. Crouch himself was stunned by the sheer ferocity of the mental attack as he was forced to relive some of the worst memories of his life, most of them including his father. He braced himself and only with a great amount of effort was he able to throw the boy out of his mind.

He glared at the Dark Prince who was looking at him with a little smile at the corners of his mouth. Crouch had underestimated the boy. That mistake would not happen again.

He focused his attention back to the meeting, vowing to himself that he would win the next round.

"Wasn't expectin' you three ter come roun' fer tea," Hagrid greeted happily as he poured them their tea.

"Actually, there's something we need to ask, Hagrid," Francis told him.

"Yeah? Wha's that?" Hagrid asked as he set a plate of cakes on the table. Ron gingerly took one, bit it and immediately let out a loud 'ow!' "Rock cakes. Careful with yer teeth."

Francis glanced at Hermione before continuing. "What do you know of the three headed dog that's guarding the trap door in the third floor corridor?"

Hagrid nearly dropped the teapot. They saw his face, ruddy from the heat, pale slightly. "How'd you three know 'bout Fluffy?"

"Please tell me Fluffy isn't that thing's name!" Ron said in disgust.

“Look Hagrid, it was by pure accident that we came by him at all,” Francis explained. “And we just want to know what he’s guarding. Please?”

“Ain’t gonna work on me, Francis,” Hagrid growled. “You lot would do good to keep yer noses outta this business, you understand?”

“So basically we’re supposed to pretend that there isn’t a three headed dog prancing about in the third floor corridor?” Ron deadpanned.

“Darned right!” Hagrid nodded vigorously.

“But what could be so important that a three headed dog would be guarding it?” Hermione mused out loud.

“Don’t go running around trying to find out now,” Hagrid warned. “That’s stric’ly between Professor Dumbledore an’ Mr. Flamel!”

“Flamel!” Francis and Ron cried out together.

“That wouldn’t be Nicolas Flamel you’re talking about now, would it?” Francis asked shrewdly. Hagrid froze, realizing he had revealed too much.

“Who’s Nicolas Flamel?” Hermione asked as the three of them headed back towards the castle near dusk after their visit with Hagrid.

Francis told Hermione about him and Ron eavesdropping on Flamel and Dumbledore’s conversation once. Hermione tapped her chin. “I think I’ve read something about him. You two go on ahead. I’ll catch up.”

Ron shrugged as Hermione ran to the direction of their dormitories. He and Francis went on ahead for dinner in the Great Hall. It was halfway through dinner when Hermione walked swiftly up to them, lugging a big book under one arm. She spread the book open and pointed out the paragraph to Francis and Ron. Their jaws dropped open when they read it.

“The Sorcerer’s Stone?” Francis asked in a hoarse whisper.

“He’s over six hundred?” Ron frowned. “No wonder he looked so old...”

“No, Ron! Don’t you get it? That’s what You-Know-Who’s after! The Sorcerer’s Stone! It’s what Hagrid took from the vault that day and brought here to Hogwarts. That’s what Fluffy’s guarding!” Francis told them in a hushed tone.

“So? What can we do about this?” Ron asked.

“He’s going to try and get it again. I just know it. We have to protect it, guys.”

TBC

Wow. Brave of Francis. Hope you liked this chapter. Read and review! Love ya!

Coming up: the dark order in Hogwarts. Will they finally get the Stone?

Chapter Nineteen: The Sorcerer's Stone

"Mr. Eveleigh." Francis turned at the sound of his name.

Professor McGonagall was giving him a stern look from behind her glasses. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be at the Great Hall having dinner with everyone else?"

"I just need to speak to Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall," Francis answered.

"Need?" the Transfiguration teacher marched over to him. "Professor Dumbledore is not here today, Mr. Eveleigh. What you 'need' to tell him can wait. I suggest you run along to dinner with your other friends."

But Francis was already striding away, one thought dominating all others in his mind. Dumbledore isn't here. They're going to take it tonight.

Later that night...

"Mr. Flamel!"

"Minerva," the old wizard bowed his head slightly to the slightly agitated woman rushing towards him. "You're looking well tonight."

"Why thank you, Mr. Flamel," Professor McGonagall replied, taking the time to catch her breath. "I'm afraid you've come at a rather inopportune moment, sir. Albus isn't here tonight. He was called away by the Ministry on some matter or the other. Might I offer you some tea, though?"

"Tea would be fine, Minerva. And call me Nicolas. Mr. Flamel makes me feel as old as I really am," the older man chuckled.

Professor McGonagall led the way to the teacher's lounge, which happened to be empty as of the moment. "I didn't quite expect you to arrive at this time. It's past the students' curfew already," Minerva McGonagall managed to say as she waved her wand. A pot of tea

and two cups appeared on the table between them. The transfiguration teacher poured some into Flamel's cup.

The older man took a sip of tea and looked at Minerva McGonagall from over the rim of the teacup. "I was feeling somewhat... troubled. I'd thought to seek Albus' advice or even company but apparently he's not here." Nicolas Flamel lapsed into silence for a moment. Then he raised his head and smiled at McGonagall.

"Albus has told me about the help the teachers here at Hogwarts have provided for the safety of the Sorcerer's Stone. I commend you. Your methods are most clever indeed," Flamel complimented.

"Well, it did take all of us. Although Professor Dumbledore's method is what I would call the most clever," Professor McGonagall answered. She paused. "Would you like to see where it is being kept? The Stone, I mean."

Flamel's eyebrows rose. McGonagall continued, "There are Order members there right now. "

"The Order of the Phoenix, hm? It has been a somewhat long time since I've seen them. I suppose a little visit wouldn't hurt. It does seem rather a pity if I should leave as soon as I arrive, doesn't it?" Nicolas Flamel stood up. "Lead the way then, my dear Minerva."

"I'm going to bed. 'Night Francis, Hermione, Ron," Neville waved to them as he climbed up to the boys' dormitories. The three of them chorused good nights. They waited impatiently for ten minutes to pass, to make sure that Neville really had gone to the dormitories.

When there was no other sign of life around the Gryffindor common room, the three of them stood up.

"Francis, this isn't a good idea," Hermione insisted as Francis and Ron walked up to the portrait entrance. "It's against the rules to go out of the dormitories at this time of night! What if we get caught?"

"We won't get caught, Hermione!" Francis assured her confidently.

Hermione just shot him a skeptical look. Francis sighed. "Look if you really don't want to come, you can just stay here."

He pushed open the portrait hole and stepped outside, Ron close behind. With a frustrated growl, Hermione followed them. "You two will probably get into more trouble without me," she hissed. "But if we do get caught, I'll tell them it was all your idea!"

Francis smiled. "All right. If we get caught. Now come on and be quiet! Filch'll hear you from the other side of the castle with that racket you're making."

So saying, the three friends slowly made their way through the shadowy, moonlit corridors of Hogwarts.
Elsewhere in the castle...

Stephen watched as the caved in passage in front of them slowly reconstructed itself into a corridor. Crouch pocketed his wand and gave a slight bow to Voldemort. The small gesture caused a frown on the Dark Prince's face. Voldemort strode purposefully forward and Stephen followed close behind him. Behind them were the muffled footsteps of the other Death Eaters.

They were walking in the secret passageway inside Hogwarts. Whenever Stephen pressed his palm on the walls of the castle, he could faintly feel the hum of magic. It reminded him somewhat of his own Darkness. Thran had opted not to let Marric and Mela join in this mission. They were in the manor now, probably asleep, Stephen thought.

Up ahead, he saw Crouch stop. "Nox," the Death Eater whispered and the light in his wand snuffed out. They were plunged into blackness.

But Stephen's eyes were used to the dark. Most of the rooms in the manor were dark, so his eyesight had adjusted accordingly. He could see the very faint outline of Barty Crouch pushing against the wall and he heard the sound of the wall grinding against the stone floor as it was moved. Then a dim light poured in. Crouch had opened the passageway. Stephen followed Thran outside and found himself

looking at one of the corridors of Hogwarts castle. Stephen frowned. He had expected the castle to be somewhat more... magnificent. The manor was far better than this.

“Come,” the Dark Lord ordered. There were flashes of light as Stephen and the other Death Eaters cast concealment charms on themselves.

Then stealthily, and even more quiet than the faintest rustling of wind, they walked through the corridors of Hogwarts. Stephen knew that all the Death Eaters and even Thran had gone to this school, so they didn't pay any heed to their surroundings as they traversed the hallways. Everything was new to the boy, though, and he surreptitiously glanced at the places they passed, drinking everything in.

The moving staircases were a novelty. Most of the portraits were asleep, but some that were awake merely shivered as they passed, sensing something fell in the air but not being able to see anything. Stephen followed close by on Thran's heels. Soon, he knew that they were close to their destination. There were voices, murmurs, in the air. Sharp hearing honed by Aithinne's training, Stephen knew that they weren't students' voices. The Order of the Phoenix was here indeed.

The Death Eaters of the Outer Circle stepped forward. They would lead the attack. As they slowly inched forward, Stephen heard the talking voices get louder. The flicker of firelight also grew brighter. He saw their shadows, two members of the Order of the Phoenix, gripping their wands but idly chatting to each other. The Death Eaters' concealment charms faded and with a sigh, Stephen allowed his to fade as well.

One of the Death Eaters, a brutish man named Leigh Harcroft walked forward on the Dark Lord's command. “Evening, gentlemen,” he grinned baring his teeth to the two shocked Order members who barely had time to react before they fell dead in a flash of green light.

But another Order member happened to be there also, slightly hidden in an alcove and he had seen everything. “Death Eater attack!!!” he

yelled out. The words reverberated throughout the corridors and soon, the quiet had been penetrated with chaos.

“What in the blazes do you think you’re doing here?!” James Potter shouted at them.

Ron and Hermione cringed and cowered slightly but Francis set his jaw in that stubborn way that his friends knew all too well. Sirius Black who was standing beside James Potter was shaking his head.

“We know, okay Uncle James?” Francis had called James Potter his ‘uncle’ for as long as he could remember. Same with his Uncle Sirius, too. But in all his years, he had never seen both of them so angry with him. “We know about the Sorcerer’s Stone.”

That stopped both men cold. “How did you – “ James began.

“Look, it’s not important. He’s going to try to take it, isn’t he? Voldemort’s going to try to take it!” Francis cried out.

Sirius set his mouth in a grim line. “Well he isn’t going to get it. That’s why we’re here. So you three can go back to your dormitories now.”

“Your father’d have our hides if he knew about this,” James sighed.

“Can’t we help?” Francis argued.

“Francis!” Hermione gasped. “What can we do? They can take care of it, let’s go”

“Smart girl,” Sirius smiled at Hermione. “Just do as she says. Go on”

“Oh no,” James muttered looking behind him. “Too late for that.”

“We’re in huge trouble,” Ron moaned as a livid looking Professor McGonagall marched up to them with an older man behind him who Ron and Francis recognized with a start as Nicolas Flamel.

“Mr. Eveleigh, Mr. Weasley and,” her eyes flashed. “Miss Granger! What is the meaning of this? I expected better from you, especially you Ms. Granger! What are the three of you doing here? Mr. Potter and Mr. Black? You two wouldn’t have anything to do with this, would you?”

“What? Of course not, Professor!” James Potter cried out.

“Well it’s back to the dormitories with you three!” Professor McGonagall shrilly cried out. “Thirty points from Gryffindor and detention!”

Francis opened his mouth to speak but at that very moment, they heard somebody cry out, “Death Eater attack!”

Everyone’s faces immediately lost color. “Back to your dormitories now and not another word out of you! Hurry!” Professor McGonagall cried out before running to the direction of the shout.

“Francis, let’s go!” Ron tugged at his arm and pulled him away with Hermione leading the way, shaking and looking with wide brown eyes behind them.

A few moments later, Francis snapped out of his daze and pulled his arm away from Ron. “I can’t. I have to go help them! You guys owl Professor Dumbledore and tell him what’s going on!” and saying so, he bolted back to the battle.

Ron and Hermione looked helplessly on after him.

Francis drew out his wand as he skidded to a stop. Death Eaters in their black robes and white masks were battling against members of the Order of the Phoenix. Francis saw lights flashing and bodies thudding to the ground and he was forcibly taken back to that afternoon when he and Harry had hidden in the bushes behind the Longbottom manor and witnessed somebody being killed. He shook his head to clear his thoughts only to find a wand pointed at him.

“Well, well,” a voice cackled in glee. “Lookie who we have! Its – ”

The man slumped forward as a spell hit him. Francis turned to see who had cast it and met the wizened eyes of Nicolas Flamel. "M-Mr. Flamel," Francis stuttered. "Thank you."

"You shouldn't be here," the wizard spoke quietly. "Go."

"But sir, I want to help! I hate just standing back and doing nothing!" Francis spoke vehemently.

The man looked him up and down. "This is not your place, lad," he said firmly. "Go back to safety."

Without saying anything else, the old wizard ran into the door that he, Ron and Hermione had founded earlier. Francis stood dumbfounded after him before scowling. No. This time, he would not be useless.

He ran after Flamel. Inside the room, Francis saw that Fluffy was lying on the ground, its three heads snoring as a harp played music beside it. The trapdoor was open, its gaping black mouth an invitation. Flamel descended the trapdoor and after a moment's hesitation, Francis followed him. Francis gave out a short cry of pain when he landed on the hard ground but quickly scrambled up to find Flamel's wand and wide-eyed glare trained onto him.

"You should not be here!" the older wizard vehemently spoke out. "Do you realize what could happen if the Dark Lord caught you?!"

Francis hid his nervousness. "It's better than being out there doing nothing!" he responded hotly.

Nicolas Flamel sighed as he looked the young boy over. He could not very well send him back up the trap door. Chances were great that there was a Death Eater standing guard there now. Besides... other members of the Order had been alerted and would be coming down here soon enough. When they arrived, he could hand the boy over. "Very well," he conceded softly and to a big grin on Francis' part. "Come with me."

There was just a stretch of blank wall and in the middle of it was a huge tree. It's roots cut deep into the ground and its leafy branches were spread open wide. In the middle of its trunk was a gaping, man-sized hole that as far as Stephen could see was the only entrance into the next room. Thran stood in front of the tree, surrounded by his Inner Circle.

"A life tree," the Dark Lord spoke out, with the barest hint of awe in his tone. "I have only ever seen one other before. They say it gives you life, by returning to you the time that has been lived..."

A Death Eater stepped forward and placed his hand on the tree's trunk.

"NO!" Voldemort hissed out but it was too late. The Death Eater started changing in front of their eyes. Slowly, he grew younger and younger. The harsh lines on the face smoothed away, the bones grew smaller, the beard melted and he shrank and shrank until all that remained was a heap of black robes and a white mask.

Or so, they thought. There was movement under the robes. With a disgusted expression, Thran gently kicked at the wriggling robes. A baby emerged, cooing. Stephen realized with a start that it was the Death Eater who had touched the tree.

It gives you life by returning to you the time that has been lived. So the life tree reversed aging. "Nott. Take Jugson back and see if you can scrounge up an Aging Potion," the Dark Lord ordered. "The rest of you follow me."

He cast a shield around his body and levitated himself into the hole in the center of the tree. "Be careful not to touch any part of the tree," Voldemort warned.

Stephen quickly followed suit and the rest of the Death Eaters also started casting spells. After crossing the life tree, Stephen saw that they had come into a room where a troll stood in the middle, brandishing a club and roaring at them. Lucius Malfoy, who had just landed behind Stephen, pushed past him muttering something that

sounded like, “Quirrel” and cast the Vincula curse. It imprisoned any magical being within it’s own mind and soon enough, the troll fell unconscious to the floor. Stephen was impressed. The Vincula curse was high level dark magic.

They moved on. The next room was completely dark. As soon as everyone had entered, the doors slammed shut. Stephen heard some of the Death Eaters try casting magic on it but it was locked tight. The darkness here disturbed Stephen. It was the kind of darkness designed to blind, to render one helpless. He heard the repeated cries of “Lumos” around him and knew none of the spells were working. Then out of the multitude, he heard a cry of pain. “Ouch!” the voice sounded like Avery’s. “It bit me! Something bit me!”

The next moment, all the Death Eaters seemed to be crying out. They were being scratched, pinched, bitten and kicked by things they couldn’t see. Most of the Death Eaters quickly cast shield spells, but there were some who weren’t quick enough and had even had their wands snatched from them. Stephen frowned. From what he had felt when he had been scratched earlier, the things were small, with thick leathery skin and small, sharp fangs. He felt a hand on his shoulder. By the cold touch, he knew it was Thran.

“They’re imps,” he told his mentor above the furor of noise. “They thrive in darkness and drive other creatures away by pinching, biting or other methods.” Stephen heard another Death Eater, Dolohov, shout, “Strages imps!” There were tinny cries of pain before the imps fell to the floor lifeless. Moments later, using the night vision spell, they located the exit and stepped with care to the next room.

There, it was as if they had been transported to another place. They found themselves facing a huge lake and far, far to the other end, Stephen could just barely discern a door. The water sloshed and splashed as from the lake came another magical being. Stephen recognized the picture from the books. It was one of the merpeople. He or she spoke in screechy tones to them. The Dark Lord nodded to Crouch.

The Death Eater had apparently inherited his father’s talent for languages. He knelt and spoke to the merperson. After a while,

Crouch stood up. "Master, they say that we can only pass through to the other side if we manage to catch the key to the door."

"Catch the key?" Voldemort raised a brow. The merperson screeched again and pointed to the water. Something jumped out and splashed back in. At first Stephen thought it was a fish. But on seeing another one jump out, he saw it was a key that had been charmed to act like a fish. Stepping closer and looking into the transparent water, the Dark Prince saw that there were many fish-keys swimming about.

"The real key is silver instead of gold, My Lord," Crouch supplied.

Voldemort nodded. "Lestrangle, Mulciber, Rosier, Karkaroff and Gibbon. Find that key within ten minutes. Not wasting any more time, the Death Eaters Thran had ordered cast the Bubble Head charm and plunged into the water.

Nine minutes and fifty nine seconds later...

It was Rudolphus Lestrangle who had managed to catch the key. The moment his hands clutched it, a stone walkway opened up in the middle of the water, leading straight to the door. Lord Voldemort led the way. As they crossed the stone walkway, other merpeople emerged from the lake. They did not try to stop them or talk to them but merely stared at the passing wizards with seemingly blank eyes. Karkaroff paused in front of one but Rosier who was behind him, pushed him onwards with a slight growl.

"Do not stop and do not pay them any mind!" Rosier hissed. A soft, glowing light seemed to come from the other end of the door. They entered the next room.

This room, eerily enough, reminded Stephen of the time when he had taken the Final Exam designed by the elementals before he could be trained by Thran. The entire room was occupied by a labyrinthine maze made up of stone. All of the Death Eaters hesitated at the entrance to the maze, glancing questioningly at Voldemort. The torches that lined the walls of the maze cast flickering shadows. As the shadows shifted, Stephen saw a small object lying on the maze

entrance. He walked over and picked it up. It was a miniature model of a tower. Underneath the mini tower was a small note wherein strange symbols were written.

“It is written in the runes of the ancients,” Thran observed when Stephen handed him the note. “The only thing that can lead us out of this maze is a Portkey. Unfortunately, the pieces of the Portkey are scattered around the maze and they will have to be found.”

He looked around at his Death Eaters who were all waiting for his command. “What are you waiting for? Look for them!”

Mr. Flamel paused before they entered the next room. Francis still couldn't take his eyes off of the troll that lay on the floor of the room they were currently in. Even unconscious, it looked hideous. Flamel reached into his robes and pulled out a gemstone. He shook it in his hands and the stone emitted a bright light. Francis glanced at it curiously.

“It's a starstone,” the old man smiled at him. “I discovered it in the process of creating the sorcerer's stone. It's light can chase off any darkness.”

And it came in handy in the next room they went to. Francis could not see a thing when Flamel opened the door. But as the light of the starstone bounced across the walls and ceiling, his eyes widened at what he saw.

“Dead,” Flamel sorrowfully shook his head. “All of them.”

The creatures – whatever they were, Francis thought – were not exactly the most pleasant to look at but looking at all of them lying on the floor motionless like that caused Francis to feel pity for them. “The Dark Lord has been here,” Flamel quietly pronounced. “We have to hurry before we're too late.”

It took a somewhat long time before the Death Eaters could find the pieces mainly because the pieces were very small. They used red sparks to indicate to each other where their positions in the maze was so as not to get lost or separated. There were also booby traps and other obstacles inside the labyrinth but aside from a rather nasty burn

suffered by Parkinson, they were more or less able to deliver the pieces to the Dark Lord relatively unharmed. The mini-castle Portkey slowly took shape.

After Yaxley had given the last tower to the castle, everyone stood back as Voldemort examined it. "There is something wrong," he stated ominously. "It is not working yet."

"Need these?" a voice asked with a hint of a laugh. Stephen approached Thran holding something in his palms. It was three mini-hoops.

"Of course," Crouch murmured with quiet sarcasm. "The Quidditch Pitch."

They inserted the three hoops into the model and the entire thing glowed blue. One at a time, the Death Eaters placed a finger on it. When everyone was touching the portkey, they all felt the familiar tug at their navels and it seemed like they were swept away. Circling and circling, Stephen gritted his teeth and bore it. He much preferred traveling by broomstick. This method was torturous.

Before he knew it, the world had stopped spinning. He stumbled a bit and lost his balance, nearly falling. Biting back a curse, he steadied himself. Stephen looked up and caught Crouch smirking at him. The Death Eater had, of course, not stumbled at all. Stephen glared back evenly before straightening himself up.

They were inside a room this time. Enclosed in a room was more like it. There were no doors, no windows. Just gray stone that was the same whichever way you looked, up, down, to the sides. The only thing worth taking notice in the room was the small stone table in the center. The Death Eaters followed their Master as he walked towards it. There were sigils etched onto the stone table and in the center of the table was a dice.

"What are these symbols?" Dolohov muttered. It was like nothing the other Death Eaters had seen before.

Stephen grimaced though when he saw them. "Ancient Saxon sigils," he morosely spoke out, the memory of Gal making him learn them still fresh in his mind. The sigils were incredibly difficult to read.

"What are you waiting for? Read," the Dark Lord drawled out with an unusual amused glint in his eyes as he looked upon his charge. Stephen held back a scowl, knowing full well Thran was perfectly capable of reading it himself. He bent over the symbols, smirking slightly at the nearly imperceptible look of jealousy Crouch threw at him. "It's a game," he said. He picked up the dice that was lying on the table. "You throw the dice and a number comes out."

He threw it and when it fell on the table, it was upturned to the number four. Immediately, four identical bottles appeared in front of him. "The number indicates the number of potions that will appear in front of you. One of them will take you to play to the next round. The other three are poisons that will kill."

The Dark Prince ran a hand over all the bottles, feeling each one in turn, uncorking them to look at the liquids inside. He picked the second one and without hesitation gulped it down. A tense shiver ran through the Death Eaters as they awaited what would happen. When Stephen placed the bottle back, the rest of the bottles disappeared and once more, only the dice remained on the table.

"You keep throwing the dice until you get to the group that contains the potion that will allow you to be transported out of here," Stephen finished explaining, smirking. "We may be here for a while."

"I do not have the luxury of time," Voldemort growled. "Wilkes, you're next. Pick up that dice."

The Death Eater obeyed although Stephen saw with satisfaction that his hand trembled slightly. None of the Death Eaters knew how Stephen had picked out the correct potion from the poisons. Stepping towards the back, Stephen thought that none of them had ever had the teachers he had.

It was Bella Lestrage who had found the final potion. The moment she drank it down, a door appeared on one of the walls. Stephen felt

Thran's excitement when he stood beside his mentor. According to Snape's list of teachers who had helped put up defenses, there was only one more left. Albus Dumbledore's. They left the stone room with six Death Eaters staggering behind a little. They had drunk the poisons at first but thanks to the antidotes that Snape himself had given them before the mission, they weren't dead.

The final room was circular and lit by flickering torches. Stephen frowned as he looked around. He could feel nothing threatening around this room. At least not yet. The only power that throbbed seemed to come from the center of the room and at the center was... Stephen stepped closer and frowned. A mirror.

Thran began to walk towards the mirror and Stephen and Crouch accompanied him. The rest of the Death Eaters were checking to see if the room had any more hidden traps. There was an inscription at the top of the mirror. Stephen read, "I show not your face but your heart's desire."

The Dark Lord let out a low chilling laugh. "Very clever, Dumbledore. The Mirror of Erised. The stone is within the mirror, then, and only the person who truly wishes to find the stone, and not use it, can get it." Stephen's eyes widened at that. Perhaps the aging leader of the Order of the Phoenix did have some juice left in him after all. The mirror of Erised shows what you desire most. As Thran tapped around the mirror, muttering spells and incantations, Stephen stepped right in front of it. What did he desire most?

He saw himself, his black Darkness glowing flush around him. In front of him were three prone figures. Stephen saw that they were corpses of his parents and Wycksworth. Behind his mirror self, stood Thran. Stephen was slightly taken aback at this. The Dark Lord was looking at him with satisfied red eyes. He turned from the mirror and pondered on what he saw.

Killing the people who had made him suffer was something that burned in his heart constantly. It did not come as a surprise. Nor did the image of him mastering his Darkness. What surprised him was that one of the things he so desired was Thran's approval. Stephen frowned. Why would that matter so much to him? Thinking back, he

realized that Thran had always been there for him. He had given him much more than clothes, a roof over his head and food. The Dark Lord's belief in him had never wavered. Thran knew him better than anyone.

Stephen did not know if this was good or bad.

"There are many of them," Flamel said softly. "I do not know if I will be able to take on them all."

"Other members of the Order should be arriving soon," Francis whispered in reply. Flamel hesitated, not wishing to tell the young boy that it might be too late. He thanked the gods that he and Albus had managed to set up the Mirror of Erised as the last defense against the stone.

"It will get dangerous soon," Flamel spoke to the young boy. He raised his wand and uttered out an incantation. "It is a concealment charm," he explained to a no longer visible Francis Eveleigh. "The Dark Lord must not get his hands on you."

Within the circular room, with the mirror still stubbornly clinging on to the Stone, Stephen stiffened. Catching his movement, the Dark Lord half-turned to his charge with a questioning glint in his eyes.

"Two people," the boy uttered in a low voice. "I sense that one of them holds great power."

The Dark Lord stilled, then nodded. "I can feel them now also."

A portion of the room exploded, sending several of the Death Eaters sprawling over the floor. Instinctively, the Dark Lord and Stephen raised shield spells as did quite a few other Death Eaters. A series of other spells was shot from the same spot, some of the spells eating their way through the Death Eaters' shields.

"How troublesome," the Dark Lord muttered. "Yaxley, Parkinson, Lestrangle, Crouch. Get rid of that. Boy, go with them." Stephen inwardly smirked as he moved in with the four other Death Eaters. They were shooting spells but the person (or people) on the

other side was just as adept at countering. The Light wizard cast a curse that ripped through the room. Stephen merely stepped aside, still holding his shield about him to evade the curse. Most of the other Death Eaters were knocked to the floor. What followed next was a series of spells shot so fast that Stephen was actually impressed with the skill of the caster. It came very close to the speed with which Thran shot spells. The Death Eaters who were knocked down froze as the spells sped towards them. The Dark Prince sighed. Must he?

“Tutela,” he murmured and spot shields appeared in front of the fallen Death Eaters. He saw Crouch shooting him a surprised glance before nimbly jumping to his feet to adopt a fighting stance. Stephen felt Thran’s impatience and raised his wand in order to finish the job.

“Mutilare.” The curse ripped through the air and hit the other person straight on. The concealment charm around the person vanished and they saw the surprised face of one Nicolas Flamel before he doubled over in pain.

The Dark Lord himself walked forward and grasped the other wizard’s hair. He muttered a curse and soon Flamel’s screams reverberated throughout the entire room. The Death Eaters encircled the Light wizard as the Dark Lord cast the curse on and off. This was done until Flamel’s voice started to turn hoarse from screaming. Then Voldemort levitated his body into the air. Flamel opened pain-hazed eyes.

“I want the Sorcerer’s Stone, Mr. Flamel. Surely, you are aware of that...” the Dark Lord hissed.

“You will... not get it!” Flamel spat out weakly.

“Tsk, tsk, but we are being stubborn about all this,” Voldemort smoothly said. “Tell me, Mr. Flamel, when was the last time you drank the Elixir of Life? It was over a month ago, was it not? The Elixir is like Polyjuice Potion, it must be taken in monthly. The effects of the Elixir are waning in you, I can feel it. You are not quite as strong as you once were, are you? And if I were to cast the Killing Curse now? It would be the end of your life!”

Flamel coughed and spat out blood. "Go ahead. I'd rather give my life than to give you the Stone."

"Is that so? Then let us see how strong your conviction stands," the Dark Lord snarled before signaling to his Death Eaters.

Stephen frowned. He had felt two people. There was still someone else unaccounted for. He narrowed his eyes as he saw Crouch discreetly leave the circle and walk towards the door. Stephen hesitated, torn between following the Death Eater or staying put. He did not have to wait long though. He felt Crouch's magic as the Death Eater cast a spell and a couple of minutes later, the door was thrown open and Crouch was dragging someone inside. For the first time since training with the Dark Lord, Stephen was taken by surprise. It was Francis Eveleigh.

Francis saw Mr. Flamel's eyes widen in surprise and then fear as the Death Eater dragged him over to the Dark Lord. He tempered down the fear that was slowly rising in him at the sight of the cloaked men in white masks. The elite Inner Circle.

Despite himself, a shiver of fear ran down his spine. Slowly, he met the blood red eyes of the Dark Lord and a cold sweat broke out over his body. Then his eyes transferred to the person beside You-Know-Who. Francis realized with a start it was him. The enigma that was plaguing the Order. The Dark Prince coolly ran disturbingly familiar green eyes over him.

"It seems that someone has decided to join us in this little gathering, Death Eaters," the Dark Lord silkily stated as Crouch roughly pushed Francis on the floor in front of him. "My thanks, Crouch. You have been exemplary as usual."

Crouch and Stephen's eyes met and electricity crackled in the air. Envy is a weakness, jealousy is a blindfold, Stephen kept telling himself as he controlled the urge to wipe the smirk off Crouch's face. So he got the Eveleigh boy! What did it matter to Stephen? That I didn't get there first, Stephen thought bitterly to himself.

Thran tapped his wand lightly to the side of Eveleigh's cheek and the expression in the boy's blue eyes was one of fear and disgust. The Dark Lord laughed.

"So... Francis Eveleigh. You have power immeasurable, so the prophecy says," Voldemort's tone was mocking. "And the Light wishes for you to... dispose of me. How truly desperate they must be to pin their hopes on one child. Show it to me then. Show me this power immeasurable."

"I will too defeat you!" the Eveleigh boy cried out, incensed.

"Ah, courageous. Much like your father then. In fact, I knew your father. He was one of us until not so long before you were born when he decided to turn into a blood-traitor," the Dark Lord sneered. Stephen saw Francis' eyes widen in shock.

"My father was never one of you!" he cried out.

"Oh? Is that what he told you? Tsk, tsk. Imagine that. A father lying to his own son," Voldemort jeered.

"I'm not going to listen to your lies!" Eveleigh cried out, his voice quavering only a bit.

"Manners, young savior. Crucio!"

As Francis Eveleigh writhed on the floor, screaming in pain with Thran's Death Eaters laughing around him, Stephen felt a savage pleasure. Let Eveleigh know what it was like to be tortured. Let him feel the pain that Stephen felt.

When the Dark Lord finally pulled out the Cruciatus, the Dark Prince's eyes gleaming with twisted delight was the first thing Francis saw. He contained the urge to vomit. The pain... the pain was like nothing he had ever felt before. He had heard of the Cruciatus. Francis whimpered as he moved his body. The curse's after effects still shook him up. The Dark Lord turned to Flamel.

“Do you see, Mr. Flamel? How pitifully your ‘savior’ begs! I have only one thing more to say to you. Take the Stone from the mirror or this boy will die.”

Flamel sought out Francis’ frightened eyes then returned to Voldemort. “How do I know you won’t kill the both of us anyway?”

“You don’t,” Voldemort coldly answered. “I might kill Eveleigh or I might not. But if you do not take out the Stone, I most assuredly will. Then I can always force you to take out the Stone and kill you.”

The Dark Lord watched his words sink in from the old man’s bleak expression. “But then again, if you do take it out now I might just refrain from killing the Eveleigh boy long enough until your Order of the Phoenix dogs get here to rescue him. The choice, Mr. Flamel, is in your hands.”

There was silence for a couple of minutes. Stephen watched the play of emotions across Flamel’s eyes interestedly. Before the man even said anything, Stephen knew what he had decided. Flamel slowly pulled himself up. One of the Death Eaters, thinking he would escape, made to stop him but Voldemort stopped said Death Eater with a sharp gesture.

Wincing from the curses he’d been through, Flamel made his way to the Mirror of Erised. Francis watched with horror dawning as he realized what the wizard would do.

“Mr. Flamel, no!”

But Flamel had taken out his wand and started reciting incantations. Runes glowed around the edges of the mirror and Flamel traced them one by one. Stephen observed the older man, fascinated, taking in the actions that he was doing. Stephen recognized the language Flamel was speaking. It was one of the Ancient Tongues. Old Magic bound the Mirror of Erised. There was a bright yellow glow from the mirror and Stephen saw Flamel reach out and his hand passed through the mirror to the inside. There were gasps and murmurs from the Death Eaters. Even Francis looked on, jaw slack.

When Flamel pulled his arm back out, the Sorcerer's Stone was clutched in it. There was an anticipatory gleam in the Dark Lord's eyes. The Stone was blood red and no bigger than Flamel's fist. It was amusing, thought Stephen, how such a thing could mean so much to people.

"I kept my word. Now it is your turn to keep yours," Flamel hoarsely declared.

"Very well then. Hand me the Stone first," Voldemort hissed, his eyes focused on the Stone alone.

But Flamel hesitated as though realizing something. Stephen started. Something was very wrong here. Reflexively, he turned his head towards the door and felt the coming of wizards – many of them. The Order of the Phoenix! he cursed. Before he could warn Thran, everything happened in swift succession.

Flamel raised the Stone as the doors burst open and the members of the Order of the Phoenix rushed in. The Death Eaters rushed to head them off at the same time that Flamel threw the Stone to the floor. It shattered into a million blood red pieces. There was stunned silence for the barest split second.

"NO!" Voldemort cried out. Before the Dark Lord could move towards Flamel, two men blocked Flamel from Voldemort.

"Mr. Flamel, go! We've already retrieved Francis sir!" one of the men shouted. Sure enough, Francis Eveleigh was being led outside the door and undoubtedly back to the safe halls of Hogwarts.

"Do not let him leave this place alive!" Voldemort roared, pointing to Flamel.

Stephen saw Crouch make for the old wizard who was running away but Order members blocked his path. Flamel was almost out the door. With lightning fast speed, Stephen headed him off. The next thing

Flamel knew, the Dark Prince was standing between him and the door, wand raised and eyes glinting.

“On the Dark Lord’s order, Mr. Flamel,” Stephen mocked as he probed Flamel with his magic. There were only traces of the Elixir of Life left in him but those traces might not effect the Killing Curse entirely. And Stephen took no chances.

He took a small portion of his Darkness and strengthened the Killing Curse he was building up with it. Thran did not have to know, he reasoned pointing his wand at Flamel. Order members seeing rushed to stop him but it was far too late.

“Avada Kedavra!”

The lifeless body of the maker of the Sorcerer’s Stone thudded to the stone floor. The Dark Lord himself kicked at the shards of what had once been the Sorcerer’s Stone before turning to his Death Eaters. “Tenebrae descensus!” he cried out.

The Order members all yelled as they clutched their eyes. Stephen smirked. He was familiar with the curse. Thran had taught it to him just a few weeks ago. It robbed one’s enemy of the ability to see light, rendering them blind. There were desperate cries of ‘Lumos’. The Dark Lord glared disgustedly at them then turned to the Death Eaters who awaited his instructions.

“More of the Order rats are coming. I can sense them. Our stay here is long overdue,” Voldemort said. He cast a baleful glance at the struggling Order members. “Kill them all and we shall go.”

As cries of ‘Avada Kedavra’ filled the air, Stephen cast a sideways glance at Thran. There was a barely repressed fury in his entire countenance. Even his eyes seemed redder than usual. The boy felt a slight moment of sympathy for the Death Eaters. It would not be pleasant for them once they had returned to the headquarters of the Dark Order. Voldemort was very angry.

Before heading off to join the other Death Eaters, Stephen paused for a moment to look at the glittering, broken shards of what had been the most sought-after gem in the Wizarding World. The red gleam reflected in his eyes for a moment and then he left.

TBC

Okay. It took me a helluva long time to finish this chapter. And I really didn't mean for it to be this long. Quite honestly, I'm shocked that it is this long. And in terms of creativity, this is probably my least creative chapter yet. Yes, I'll also deviate from the canon in the latter chapters, no worries. Please review. I apologize for the possible typo and grammatical errors. I edited this in haste.

Coming up: classes of the Dark Order

Chapter Twenty: Classes of the Dark Order

The man fumbled a bit as he tapped his wand on his cigarette, lighting it. When the end finally sparked red, he stashed the wand back inside his robes and took a deep breath of tobacco and smoke, feeling it mingling in his mouth and drifting down to his lungs. He exhaled and felt better. He had huddled into the alcove of the closed stone doors of the tomb, his robes wrapped all around him including his face and the only openings were for the eyes and the slit for the mouth where he was smoking.

All around him in the desert, the sandstorm raged. The wind was strong and the sands were angry. The frightened man took this as a sort of sign that the place they were about to open was indeed cursed. And the one who cast the curse was not going to be happy about his resting place being opened.

The man had tried the best he could in broken English to explain to the foreigners in the Ministry of Magic why it was a bad idea to open this newly discovered tomb. But ignorant that they were, of course, the foreigners laughed it off. Money and treasures. It was all they were after. They thought that magic could ward off all curses. But the man knew better. This curse felt more powerful than any he had ever experienced.

The storm made him jittery. The fact that it was delaying the arrival of the people from the Ministry made him even more jittery. He inhaled the cigar again, deeply disturbed. There was an undercurrent of strange magic in the air. He started when he saw the shadowy, unmistakable forms of human figures slowly making their way towards him in the haziness of the sandstorm. They were finally here!

The man dropped his cigar and crushed it underfoot feeling very relieved. He stopped hunching over in the alcove and took a couple of steps towards the men. It slightly puzzled him why they suddenly stopped a couple of meters away from him.

It was only then that he noticed the inky blackness of their robes and the wand one of them had trained towards him. The last thought that

crossed his mind as the jet green light traveled through the air was, it is the curse.

-

Stephen stared with eyes that held only the barest hint of curiosity as the lifeless body slumped to the ground. He turned to the Death Eater to his immediate right.

“Get rid of the body,” the fact that the chilling words were delivered in so normal a tone made two of the other Death Eaters with him flinch.

As the Death Eater hurried towards the body, Stephen and the others stepped past him to the door of the tomb that was sealed tightly shut. Pennington raised his wand and chanted something then the door was outlined with bright golden Egyptian hieroglyphs. Laid over those were still more hieroglyphs and there were some runes that did not look distinctly Egyptian at all.

Stephen's impassive expression betrayed none of his excitement as Pennington continued examining the entrance to the underground tomb. This was the first mission Thran had given for him to lead and he was both eager to prove himself and nervous that he might make a mess of things. Granted the mission was a fairly simple retrieval one but Stephen's cautious nature warned him it was best not to take chances. Thran had even sent along two members of his precious Inner Circle, Pennington and Rabastan Lestrangle to 'help out' in the unlikely event that matters got sticky. It irked Stephen slightly and he made sure that Lestrangle and Pennington knew that they were there merely to help if ever help was needed. Stephen was going to make sure it was not.

They had come here to take one object. Well, the mummy was more of a creature than an object really. Stephen had asked what a mummy would be doing there. It was not even a pyramid, not the tomb of an exalted pharaoh. But Thran had merely told him to keep quiet and he would find out once he got back successfully. Stephen did not press the point as Thran had looked rather menacing at that time.

Pennington turned to Stephen. "There are ancient spells here, to be true, and they are rather complicated ones. But above all those spells I detect a fresh layer of magic that does not blend with the other magics. Someone has been here before us. But you can see that although the person did a good job with the newer spells, there are signs of sloppiness suggesting that, having initially found and done a superficial survey of the tomb, the person left in a hurry, only bothering to reactivate the old spells on the door and adding a layer of new ones before hastening to tell his superiors, no doubt, of the find."

Stephen nodded. He saw and felt the magics himself. "Will they be any trouble to remove?"

"The ancient spells will be rather troublesome, young master. But the rest will be fairly simple," Pennington replied. Beneath the respectful tone though, Stephen felt the man's calculating nature, observing and summing him up.

"Get rid of what you can," he ordered them. "Danvers, Wilkes, scout the surroundings and set the alarms and traps."

As the Death Eaters scurried off to do his bidding, Stephen breathed in deeply and suppressed a grin. Ordering around Thran's Death Eaters felt even better than he had imagined. The only thing he did not like at all about this mission was the sandstorm. The bloody sandstorm that stuffed sand every which way in Stephen's clothes. He should have anticipated this and learned some sort of sand-repelling spell before he left.

Oh well, he was here and it was too late anyway. He mentally ran through the plan in his head again, meticulously picking out the details of it. Thran said he was obsessive when it came to details. Stephen took it as a compliment; Thran's tone had sounded as such anyway and his compliments were always veiled in such a way that you would miss them unless you knew what to listen for.

"Young master, the traps and alarms are set," Wilkes reported back.

Stephen nodded and he and the two Death Eaters made their way back to the entranceway at the same moment that Pennington removed the last spell around it. Stephen blinked at him. Pennington looked drained. Perhaps the spells really were that complicated. Sweeping past the other man, Stephen headed to the entrance and started to push at the stone door.

“Young master, that stone must probably weight all of eight tons,” there was a note of condescension in Rachis' voice. “Perhaps a featherweight charm would - ”

The door slid open easily to the force of Stephen's hand. The Death Eaters gaped. It was a moment before they recovered enough to realize that Stephen had already entered the dark interior of the tomb. Lestrangle shook his head. How many times did he have to remind himself never to underestimate the strange boy?

There were whispers of “Lumos” as the Death Eaters entered the tomb. From the entrance, two passages immediately branched off to the left and to the right. The passages were narrow and in the light of their wands, hieroglyphs filled the walls from top to bottom.

Stephen turned to Rachis. Thran had told him to leave the matter of finding the tomb to Rachis. Stephen did not much like relinquishing the control he was enjoying right now, but he had little choice. “Well?” he archly asked Rachis who seemed to be consulting a piece of parchment.

“We go to the left, young master. The tomb and artifact we seek is still a long way off,” Rachis said softly, a new note of respect now obvious in his tone.

“Then we'd better start walking.”

-

“Young master?” Rachis called out.

They were already deep within the winding passageways of the tomb, and the other Death Eaters halted at the same time that Stephen paused in his walking. The young boy was staring at a blank portion of the wall. At first, Rachis couldn't understand why but he saw that that wall was not covered with hieroglyphs.

Stephen reached out to touch it. The moment his fingers made contact, the wall caved inside, revealing a hidden doorway. Unconsciously, Stephen took a step towards it.

"Begging your pardon, young master," Pennington cut in smoothly. "But according to the map, the central tomb is this way."

Stephen frowned. "Be quiet."

Hand outstretched, wand lighting the way, he stepped into the hidden passage.

"We're not supposed to be taking any detours," Wilkes harshly whispered to Danvers.

Danvers shrugged before reluctantly following the young boy. Stephen was, after all, the leader of this mission. And they had no choice but to follow him.

One by one, the rest of the Death Eaters followed into the passageway that, Rachis was terrified to notice, not marked on the map at all.

-

The group of seven men came to a stop in front of the tomb entrance. They all stopped walking when they saw that the Egyptian contact that they were supposed to have met up with was lying dead in front of the wide-open tomb doors.

"What happened here?" one of the men asked.

A second approached the dead man, prodding him with a wand. He shook his head. "Gone. The Killing Curse."

The man who had first spoken cried out something in an unintelligible language and spat on the ground. "Death Eaters," he growled. "We have to hurry. Them being here means they want something. We have to stop them from getting it no matter what."

They all hurried into the tomb and came to a stop when the way split to the left and to the right. "Where to?" a woman asked, uncertainly. "This was only supposed to be a survey. We don't know our way around here at all."

"We split up," a third man announced coolly. "Nargev, you Hailim, Anatel, and Grove go to the right. Reevia, Weasley and I will take the left. We will survey these passages and return here in an hour."

"But Fraise..." the man called Nargev tried to protest.

He was met with a chilly glare and a hissed, "We don't have time. Who knows what those blasted Death Eaters are doing now. When you do come upon them, do not engage. You go back here and wait for us. We will do the same. If an hour and thirty minutes has passed we return and rendezvous back here regardless. Is that clear?"

At their reluctant nods, Fraise motioned for them to get going. He himself took the left passageway with Alelle Reeve and the Englishman, Bill Weasley. As the three of them made their way through the narrow passages, Weasley in front and Fraise bringing up the rear, Fraise chanced a glance at his right palm.

On his right palm, etched in Indelible Ink, was the exact map of the passageways. Also marked there was the room where he would rendezvous with the Death Eaters already inside. Busily, Fraise began to plot on how he could get rid of Reeve and Weasley.

-

An hour later...

Fraise was sweating profusely. It had nothing to do with the temperature, the underground was quite cool. He was sweating because the room – their rendezvous point – was empty. The Death Eaters were supposed to be here already! He had shaken off Reevia and Weasley when the passage had split into three directions, making them take the other two, but he had only twenty minutes before he had to get back to Reevia and Weasley.

He scrutinized the map etched in his palm again, carefully. He had taken the right turns. This was supposed to be the room. Only the Death Eaters weren't here. Which meant something had gone wrong. His blood started to run cold.

His position in the Egyptian Ministry of Magic was a precarious one and he could not afford to blow his cover as a spy of the Dark Order. Which meant he had to find the Death Eaters. Before his other companions did.

Muttering a prayer to the gods for guidance, Fraise slipped from the room and, examining the map on his hand, began his search for the other missing Death Eaters.

-

They were in a tiny room, barely big enough for all of them to fit in together. They'd had to dodge scorpions, scarab beetles and countless poisonous cobras in order to reach this room, not to mention the innumerable traps along the way. With each obstacle they passed, Lestrage noticed the Dark Prince's smile grow wider. Of course. If this place was hidden and heavily guarded, then it only made sense that something important awaited them in the end.

The Death Eaters were not prepared for what they found though.

"That dirty scrap of metal is what we came all the way here for?" Wilkes rasped incredulously.

Pennington growled at him to be quiet. Wilkes angrily cried out, "We're already late for meeting up with that spy! And we had to make a little trip here in order to find nothing but a —"

"Uneducated fool," Lestrangle interrupted icily. "Don't you know what that is?"

"Huh?"

Stephen had already stepped forward, wand out and muttering and countering the spells that were laid around the object. When he was perfectly sure it was safe, he took the object from the rock pillar where it had been laid.

"There is a little known ancient Egyptian legend that says that once, the goddess Isis gifted the very first pharaoh with three golden ankhs as a reward for building a temple in her honor. Although the legend was never very clear on what, the ankhs apparently had some sort of power in them. They were thought lost in time though and nobody has ever been able to find them or even prove they existed," Lestrangle explained.

Sure enough, Stephen had wiped the object with his robe and as the dirt and grime came off, the golden sheen was made more evident.

Thran's going to love this, he decided cheerfully as he stowed the ankh away in his robes.

"Young master?" a sardonic voice broke in.

He turned to Pennington. "What is it?"

"I believe it's a wonderful discovery that the young master has just made but we are extremely pressed for time and Wilkes has a point. We need to meet up with the spy," was the toneless reply.

Stephen, although outwardly unruffled as he began to walk back to where they came from, felt chilled. This was the first mission that he

led. If he failed this... he suppressed a shudder thinking of what sorts of imaginative punishments Thran might have in store.

And he walked just a little bit faster.

-

“There you are!” Fraise fought and failed to keep the gratefulness in his voice. He had been pacing the same corridor over and over again, sweating crazily and trying to think of what could have happened to keep the other Death Eaters.

They approached him hurriedly now. They had on their masks so he couldn't pick out who was who. Fraise himself didn't wear a mask – he trusted that the Dark Lord would send people who wouldn't compromise his identity and besides, a Death Eater's mask would have been hard to explain away had any of his colleagues accidentally seen it. What caught Fraise's attention though, was the figure in front leading them. Now that mask was unmistakable. The Dark Prince.

Fraise himself hadn't been in the Headquarters when the boy had been unveiled to the Death Eaters but he had heard stories and rumors surrounding this mysterious young child. There was talk of him being the Dark Lord's protégé, which was possible. The other talk of him being the Dark Lord's successor was something Fraise scoffed at. Even the Dark Prince's presence though was not enough to deter from the anger that had slowly been building at Fraise for the past half hour.

“Where have you been?!” he hissed. “I told you I didn't have much time and I cannot afford to have my position compromised – ”

“We took a detour,” the Dark Prince smoothly interceded. The voice, Fraise shuddered, was both boyish and cold. “Now, do you have the Egyptian Ministry of Magic's information regarding the thing that we're searching for in this tomb?”

Fraise made a disbelieving sound in his throat. "Of course. I am a professional when it comes to these matters. Here, hurry. I have no more time to spare as it is."

Wordlessly, Stephen took the proffered sheaf of parchment papers and leafed through them.

In retrospect, perhaps remaining in the corridors wasn't the wisest of decisions. Perhaps they really should have sought a more private room. Because not long afterwards –

"Fraise? What in the name of the gods is going on?!" it was a woman's voice and Fraise froze when he recognized it.

On the far end of the corridor stood Reevia and Weasley, both staring at him and the Death Eaters with utterly shocked faces. For a moment, both sides just stood there, looking at each other. Weasley was the first to move. He shoved Reevia to a side corridor, whipped out his wand and yelled out a curse.

It didn't take Stephen, who was already holding his wand, long to counter the curse and by the time he looked again, Weasley and Reevia had run off, footsteps echoing.

"After them!" he growled lowly.

-

Nargev, Hailim, Anatel and Grove were restlessly shifting about near the entrance to the tomb. The corridor they had taken had only led them to a dead end and it wasn't long before they'd made their way back to the appointed meeting place. Fraise, Reevia and Weasley were over half an hour late. Waiting in silence, in this tomb, made the four men uneasy. Being in any kind of tomb made them uneasy. Fraise had been especially strict on the time. Had something happened?

It was Anatel's superb hearing that made him pick it up first. The faint sound of hurried footsteps and labored breathing. He caught his

companions' eyes and jerked his head towards the corridor Fraise, Reevia and Weasley had gone down on.

No sooner had the four of them turned towards the spot that Anatel had indicated when Reevia and Weasley burst forth, faces red from exertion, eyes wide and expressions desperate.

"Death Eaters!" Weasley managed to wheeze out. "We have to run. Now."

The two were making for the entrance when Hailim's arm shot out to block them. "What about Fraise, eh? Where's he?"

Reevia choked out something between a laugh and a despairing cry. "He's one of them. Fraise's in league with those... those Death Eaters!"

And before anyone can say anything the heavy stone doors that lead into and out of the tomb slide ominously shut, completely blotting out the sandstorm outside. The firelight flickered as the group of Death Eaters advanced slowly towards them.

One of them smiled awfully under that bone-white mask. "No where to run now."

-

Working as a curse-breaker for Gringotts in Egypt had seemed a dream come true for Bill Weasley. Even though he loved his family dearly, it had been quite suffocating to live in a house with five other brothers and one sister. But when the job offer had come, Bill had hesitated to take it. It was the height of Voldemort's reign. Leaving his family was the last thing he wanted to do. But his parents had persuaded him, seemingly feeling better at the thought that their eldest son at least would be away from danger.

Bill felt like laughing at the irony right now. It seemed as though wherever country you tried to run off to, Voldemort's followers were just a step behind.

He gripped his wand and faced them, chin up. That was when he caught sight of the last one to emerge from the corridor. This one was more than a head shorter than the rest. In fact, this one looked no older than his brother Ron. But Bill shivered when the eyes behind the mask shifted from them one by one. Cold.

With a start, he realized he was staring at the Dark Prince. Bill's first thought was that no description of Snape's did this child justice. There was something so bone-chilling about the way this mere boy loosely held his wand, about the subtle way the other Death Eaters – Fraise included – seemed to defer to him.

“Fraise! Eh, Fraise! They're lyin' right? There's no way you'd be in league with them Death Eaters!” it was Grove who uttered the first panicked cry.

Fraise's only reply was to avert his eyes from Grove's. They couldn't have asked for a better confirmation.

“You little traitor!” Anatel growled and he would have rushed towards Fraise had Hailim not stopped him. “You traitor!”

“This is getting annoying,” the voice of one of the Death Eaters cut in. “If you gentlemen will listen to us, we are only here to retrieve something of particular value for our master. Let us do our job and we might just let you live. Interfere and you face certain death. Of course, I cannot guarantee it will be painless.”

Hailim pursed his lips. “I will die before I allow you out of here with whatever it is you seek, Death Eater,” he growled in his gravelly voice.

Suppressing a whimper, Reevia found the strength to speak up. “That's right. We'll stop you with everything we have!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

A flash of green light and a couple of horrified cries. Reevia's body thudded to the floor, eyes wide and empty. Rachis found his hand shaking a little as he turned to Stephen. The Dark Prince merely

looked at his Death Eaters coolly, one after another as though saying, well, what are you waiting for? Get on with it!

As the first curse came sailing towards him, Bill Weasley ran behind a pillar to dodge it. A litany had unconsciously started in his mind: Please let me live through this.

-

Back in England

Stephen's head lightly hit the pillows on his bed. He hadn't changed his clothes yet, still wearing the robes he had worn in Egypt. In fact, he had tracked sand into his room and onto his bed but he found himself not really caring. One hand loosely gripped the ankh they had found.

After the incident with the Ministry dogs, they had successfully retrieved the mummy. Although mummies were not terribly fast they were difficult to capture owing to the curses that they cast. This one was particularly adept at curses involving life and death. It had taken them a trying three hours to capture it and seal it up.

Right at this moment, Stephen knew that Wilkes, Lestrangle, Rachis, Pennington and Danvers were presenting the mummy to Thran as well as a report of what had went on in the tomb.

Stephen shifted in his bed. They hadn't had any trouble dealing with the people that the Ministry of Magic in Egypt had sent. There had been one thing, though. Fraise had requested that they leave one of the people alive.

He had argued that it would have seemed suspicious if he and he alone had survived the Death Eater attack. Fraise needed another person to corroborate his story. He had suggested that they leave the red-haired Englishman alive.

"The Ministry of Magic would not care a whit if these Egyptians died but if the Englishman dies as well that would entail numerous questions from the Ministry in England as well as a full and thorough

investigation,” Fraise had logically placed. “A Memory Charm or a Confundus Charm would be enough.”

Stephen had finally agreed only on the condition that he himself would cast the spell. So aside from the Death Eaters, only Fraise and the redheaded Englishman had left the tomb alive.

They had covered up all the holes, tied up all the loose ends. So why was Stephen still feeling uneasy at having to face Thran? All things considered, this first mission wherein he was the leader had been a success.

As his hand’s grip tightened on the ankh, he smiled grimly. This had been the reason. Stephen had deviated from the goal and in doing so had nearly compromised their spy in the Egyptian Ministry of Magic. He knew Thran would most definitely not be pleased. And the thought of letting Thran down sent a pang of something unpleasant down Stephen’s throat and settled in his stomach.

He blinked. He didn’t want to disappoint Thran. Didn’t want to –

The door to his bedroom was thrown open and Thran swept in accompanied by Nagini’s welcoming hisses. Although he had been expecting it, Stephen jolted up the bed all the same. There was something faintly... unreadable in Thran’s red-tinged eyes today that made Stephen’s pulse go just a little bit quicker.

“You haven’t changed your clothes,” were the first words drawled.

Immediately, Stephen was reminded of his attire. He smiled sheepishly and flicked his wand. It changed into more comfortable black robes although he had left the sand still on his sheets to be cleaned by the house elves.

There was a short silence. And then – “Well? Explain what happened.”

He was still sitting on the bed whereas Thran was standing (looming) beside him. Stephen gave a short, nervous laugh while he fidgeted on the bed.

“I, er, don’t really know what made me do it...” he said in a voice just a hair’s breadth away from a whisper.

As he looked down at the boy, Voldemort wasn’t exactly sure how he felt. For one thing, Stephen had disobeyed direct orders and had nearly destroyed the entire mission by taking that one little detour. On the other hand, that ‘one little detour’ had just deposited into his hands one of the ankhs of life. The words rare and valuable didn’t even begin to cover just how important this object was. There had never been any tangible, physical proof that it even existed and following his instincts, without so much as a hint of warning, Stephen had found one of the three.

Then there was the fact that the boy was looking up at the Dark Lord right now with apprehension in his eyes, as if expecting Voldemort to start casting curses at any minute. How the boy could be so ruthlessly cold when he was with the other Death Eaters but so unfathomably normal when in Voldemort’s company was something that also utterly bewildered the Dark Lord.

Voldemort suppressed the sudden urge to sigh. “You are telling me you do not know how you found that?” the Dark Lord growled, indicating the object Stephen was holding on to tightly.

“I... really don’t.” There was a hint of wonder but more importantly raw honesty in that voice.

“ Well despite the fact that you deliberately disobeyed my instructions, your aimless wandering about has brought this object to the possession of the Dark Order. That, I suppose, is grounds enough to quell my anger,” Voldemort grudgingly spoke out, ignoring the light of relief in Stephen’s bright green eyes.

“Thank you Thran! I –” his voice and the huge grin were cut off by the Dark Lord’s next words.

“However, you still did disobey and that in itself has... ramifications.” Voldemort’s tone was quiet and silky. Stephen sat rigid on the bed again.

Then the room was quiet. At first Stephen thought Thran was waiting for him to continue talking, but he was at a loss as to what to add. Then he looked up at Thran but the Dark Lord had closed his eyes and pursed his lips, obviously deep in thought. Stephen stayed silent, knowing Thran was contemplating something important.

When Thran’s eyes opened again, Stephen thought he saw an amused glint in them. “I believe I have just thought up of the perfect punishment for you, boy.”

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Having lived in the sprawling mansion that was the headquarters of the Dark Order for most of his life, Stephen could hardly believe that he had never seen this section of the mansion before. Granted that it was underground, really deep below the earth, but considering that it consisted of numerous rooms, the fact that it existed at all was a surprise. Beside him, Mela’s eyes had widened while Marric was openly gaping.

The scene in front of them was... well, chaos was really the only word to describe it. People were running about, not even sparing a glance at the three children. Most of the said Death Eaters were either talking to each other in hurried voices or were consulting pieces of parchment with frowns on their faces. There were many strange machines all around the room, along with bubbling cauldrons, and weird, silvery contraptions. In one of the other rooms they had passed, they’d seen a witch and a wizard struggling to hold down a mantichore while another wizard was putting a long rod into the beast’s mouth.

After a few minutes of staring, Marric was the first to speak. “So. If this is your punishment, what exactly are Mela and I doing here?”

“Because Thran said so and because there is no bloody way I’m suffering through this alone,” Stephen muttered.

Thran's idea of a punishment had been to send Stephen to work with the different classes of the Dark Order.

The Dark Order was divided into six different groups or classes and Death Eaters were placed into the classes based on what they did best. Thran had told Stephen that he would be spending one day working with each class.

Today, he had sent them to this underground warren where the first class, known as the Innovators, worked. The Innovators, Stephen concluded looking at all the work that was being done around him, were the thinkers of the Dark Order. They were the ones who did research on magical beings, on spells and curses, and on potions.

"Well, well. How lovely of you to pay us a visit," a coldly amused tone greeted from behind them.

Marric and Mela spun around but Stephen already knew who had spoken. Sure enough, the woman stepped past his two companions and gave him a brief twitch of the lips that he supposed should have passed as a smile.

"Yaxley," Stephen muttered throwing her a bored look. "We've been waiting for ten minutes."

"My apologies. I was delayed. The dragons were being unusually temperamental," she smoothly told them. "Master has informed me that you have an item of interest for me?"

Stephen was hesitant as he started to hand over the ankh of life to her and he didn't know why. Out of all the Death Eaters in Thran's command, Yaxley was one of the most competent ones, with a keen instinct and razor sharp intelligence. In fact, she was one of the two leaders of the Innovator class. Stephen didn't know why his mind and body seemed to be against the idea of giving the ankh of life to just about anyone. Still, Thran's orders were orders.

He scowled as he handed the ankh over to Yaxley and he swore he felt a pang of something like loss as his fingers let go of the golden artifact's smooth edges. The scowl remained on Stephen's face as he saw Yaxley's eyes light up with undisguised interest and even something akin to glee.

"So this is one of the legendary ankhs of life..." she murmured in a tone that one usually reserved for clandestine meetings with lovers.

"What are you going to do with it?" Stephen tightly demanded.

She slanted her eyes at him. "What Master has asked me to do, of course. Discover its abilities and determine the best usage for it. That is what we Innovators do. Follow me."

She led the three of them across the chaotic room where they had to dodge people who were rushing past. It seemed everyone here was in a hurry. As she maneuvered through the people, Yaxley explained the purpose of the Innovator class.

"Although our work is mostly done behind the scenes and we are rarely called for missions, what we do is incredibly important," Yaxley began.

"And that work would be?" Mela asked archly.

"Research," was the succinct answer. "We research, well, everything. Spells, curses and charms for instance. We tweak and experiment with them to vary the results. Once in a while we succeed in creating a whole new spell that can actually be used in battle and we report that to the Master. It also falls to us to teach these spells to whomever Master orders us to teach."

They passed by an area where wizards were stirring huge vats of liquid. Yaxley gestured to them with a hand. "Potions. We mass produce here the really important ones. We also have people working on creating new potions. Magical creatures are also our realm. The non-sentient ones of course. Mostly it has to do with whether or not they can be trained to be employed in battle. We work with everything

from nifflers to chimeras. In fact, the mummy you brought back yesterday was a new addition. We also research on magical properties of these creatures. The Ministry is unaware that we have discovered the thirteenth use of dragon blood.”

They passed by a group of rooms that strongly reminded Stephen of an infirmary. “The Healers are also a part of our class,” Yaxley motioned. “Death Eaters can ill afford to admit themselves to St. Mungo’s when wounded in battle, so we treat them here.”

The last room they went through was a wide, dimly-lit one and it reminded Stephen somewhat of Braon’s chambers. “Divination?” he questioned Yaxley.

“Yes,” Yaxley wrinkled her nose. “Although its not a very productive part of the Innovator class, they have their uses every once in a blue moon.”

They finally reached a room with marble doors that Yaxley pushed open easily. The inside of the room was brightly lit and contained just as much strange machinery as the other rooms did. Unlike the other rooms though, this one had only one other person inside.

“Rosier,” Yaxley greeted.

The other Death Eater looked up from the tattered piece of parchment he’d been examining with a magnifying glass. His eyes fell on Yaxley, Stephen, Marric and Mela, then he grunted and returned to his work.

“Rosier is the other leader of the Innovator class,” Yaxley offered as she led them to an empty table. “Now then. Master has informed me that you three will be helping me investigate this ankh. What we will be doing is delicate and extremely precise work. It has absolutely no room for clumsiness.”

She eyed the three of them sharply and they met her eyes without any change in the expression of their faces.

There was that twitch of something akin to a small grin again. "Let us begin," Yaxley said softly.

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A few days later...

Stephen would have killed himself before admitting that he had enjoyed working with the other classes. He'd long known that the Dark Order was compartmentalized of course, but he had never exactly known what each compartment (class, he thought absently) did. He supposed this was Thran's way of immersing him deep into the workings of the Dark Order.

He was also well aware that while he enjoyed the experience, Mela and Marric weren't having quite as much fun. The experience with the Innovators for one, had made Mela's blood boil, particularly after she had dropped and ruined the eighth instrument Yaxley had handed her, after which Yaxley had archly informed her never to come near the Innovator class again.

It was their experience with the Espionage class though that Marric hated. They'd had to wear hooded cloaks there, along with everybody else. Snape, one of the two leaders of the Espionage class, had expressly forbidden them to take their cloaks off while within the vicinity of the class' chambers.

The Espionage class was fairly straightforward, Stephen had discovered. They comprised entirely of spies. This class had two leaders. One leader, Rookwood, was in charge of the spies within the Ministry, not only of England but of other countries as well. The other leader, Snape, was in charge of the spies that worked within the Order of the Phoenix.

They had spent the entire day in the Espionage class' interrogation chambers. It had been a fascinating lesson on torture (the Innovators had not finished the latest batch of Veritaserum yet and Thran was impatient for information). Stephen had wanted to try the torture instruments first hand himself but Snape had relegated them to

strictly observation duties. Marric, though, had been rigid and clammy the whole time.

After the Espionage class, they met with the Envoy class. They had Portkeyed into Romania with Pennington, the leader of the Envoy class to meet with a new vampire clan that wanted to offer allegiance to the Dark Lord. Although not quite as interesting as the previous two classes, Stephen found that the Envoy class was in charge of alliances, not just with other countries but with the other races – the vampires, the giants, the werewolves, the Dark Veelas. They kept them happy and also (in the case of the dementors) kept them under control.

In addition, they were the ones who gathered allies and along with the Espionage class, were on constant lookout for people that could be converted into potential spies for the Dark Order.

The Knight class was the largest class of all. In sheer number, none of the other classes came close to it. The Knight class was the main assault body of the Dark Order and it was further divided into the Order of the Dragon and the Order of the Skull. The three of them had spent two days with the Knight class.

The first day had been spent with Rudolphus LeStrange, one of the leaders of the Order of the Skull. The Skulls, as they were more commonly known, were mostly comprised of the new recruits, the trainees, and the Death Eaters who would never really be very talented. The leaders of the Skull were in charge of teaching its members the workings of the Dark Order. The Skulls were assigned the not too delicate or difficult missions.

More fascinating though, was the Order of the Dragon. Far fewer than the Skulls, the Dragons consisted of the elite. They were the truly talented ones to whom Thran gave demanding missions to. Stephen, Marric and Mela had accompanied Malfoy, Gibbon and Mulciber on one of these missions and it had been much more interesting than watching Rudolphus LeStrange training members of the Skulls the other day.

After that was the Warder class. Their job sounded interesting albeit easier than all the rest of the other classes. Nott had stonily explained the details of their duties to Stephen, Mela and Marric. The Warders were responsible for the protection of the Dark Order. They were like bodyguards, Stephen thought. They were also the ones who discreetly watched over the families of the Death Eaters, to make sure they could not be targeted by the Ministry or the Order of the Phoenix.

The Warders had ensured that the Dark Order headquarters was completely protected such that not even Dumbledore himself could find it. It was also the Warders job to watch out for any Death Eaters that might have become spies for the Ministry or the Order of the Phoenix and report any such suspicions to the Dark Lord. The Warders were also the ones who guarded the prisons and the dungeons of the Dark Order.

Not really a job Stephen would want but the mechanisms were fascinating anyway.

Today was the day he would be spending with the last class. Unlike the other classes whose names reflected what they were for, Stephen had no idea what this last class was for, this Shadow class. Based on what he'd managed to glean from Thran, the Shadow class was his elite. All the members were in Thran's Inner Circle of Death Eaters.

"This must be my unlucky day," a voice, nearly emotionless with only a touch of sarcasm sounded from behind Stephen.

Stephen suppressed a groan as he recognized the voice. This must be the part where Thran's 'punishment' came in. When his eyes met those of the Death Eater who had spoken, Stephen tried not to glare.

"Crouch." He had tried to make his voice measured, but it came out almost as a growl.

Mela gently laid a calming hand on his arm. Control yourself. Stephen took a deep breath. One day. Only just a couple of hours in fact, in the company of this man whom he loathed.

“So you are of the Shadow class,” Stephen tried again, voice flat.

“I would have thought that was obvious by now,” came the barbed reply.

Marric interceded before things could escalate. “What exactly does the Shadow class do? By the looks of it, it seems as though the other classes are handling matters fine.”

“Follow me,” Crouch replied, abruptly turning and striding away. “We cannot talk here.”

He led them through winding staircases, long maze-like hallways and wing after wing of the mansion. Before long, Stephen was unnerved to realize that he had never been in this part of the mansion before either. Only now was he discovering just how little of Thran’s mansion he had ever explored.

They emerged into a long hallway – one side was a long, gray wall and the other side dingy, glass floor-length windows. The hallway was a dead-end. Stephen let Crouch take the lead and the Death Eater stepped forward. He seemed to be carefully counting the windows. He stopped in front of the twelfth window and then walked through it.

Stephen’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second. Even the twins were looking a bit uneasy. But Crouch was waiting for them. Stephen took a deep breath and stepped in after the Death Eater. The sensation was like passing through water.

Crouch was waiting on the other side. Stephen tried not to gape when he saw the luxurious surroundings. The headquarters of the Shadow class (if this was indeed it) was perhaps the most opulent of the six classes’. Soft carpeting, gilded wallpaper, exquisitely carved crystal chandeliers, and the fireplace if Stephen wasn’t mistaken was of the finest quality marble.

Stephen quirked a brow at Crouch whereas the other man simply shrugged. "The perks of power," he offered with the slightest hint of a smirk.

Crouch gestured for them to seat themselves on the plush armchairs near the center of the room and the three gingerly settled themselves. Crouch took the armchair across from them and for a long, uncomfortable moment, nobody spoke.

"Well? Where are the rest of you?" Mela was the one who broke the silence.

"As of now, the Shadow class is the only class that is not completely mobilized yet," was the vague reply.

Stephen scowled and Crouch smirked before elaborating further. "You asked me before what it was that we of the Shadow class do. As you are well aware, even in the Dark Lord's eyes the Shadow class is special. We handle the highest-risk missions that even those of the Dragon Knight class are not entrusted. Aside from that, we are also the eyes in the darkness. We observe and carefully pick apart each and every Death Eater in the Dark Order, investigating them for the slightest hint that they might betray us."

Stephen snorted. "That doesn't sound all that different from the Warder class."

Crouch's expression seemed to freeze over. "Do not even compare us to those bodyguards. No spy of the Ministry or the Order of the Phoenix could escape our purge. Once we have confirmed that the person in question really has betrayed the Dark Order, then we move to... eliminate."

Stephen blinked finally getting the distinction. The Warders were something like alarms, to report any and all suspicions to Thran. But these Shadows, they were like hawks. They trained their sharp vision on the target and then swooped in for the kill. Stephen had a feeling that the 'highest-risk missions' assigned to the Shadow class were also assassination missions.

Crouch nodded slowly when he saw the light of understanding dawn in the Dark Prince's green eyes. "We are the true guardians of the Dark Order. The only two people who know the identities of all the Shadow class are its leaders and the leaders have to be Death Eaters that the Master trusts implicitly. One of these leaders, Callahan, died in an ambush by the Order of the Phoenix two years ago."

"So then who's the other leader?"

Crouch's tone was smug when he said, "I am."

Stephen just stared stonily and the empty silence filled up with tension. Mela tried not to squirm in her seat and this time, for the sake of speech, Marric was the one who broke the silence.

"I don't understand. How is that related to the fact that we're the only ones here?"

"The ambush that killed my previous partner, Callahan, was also the same ambush that landed me in Azkaban. We were supposed to meet with some high-level Ministry spies in Zephyn's mansion." Marric and Mela turned suddenly very still. Crouch continued. "Somehow, they found out about our meeting place. Very few managed to escape. That was a serious blow, especially for the Espionage class. According to our spies, the one who reported to the Order of the Phoenix was a Death Eater named Corvin."

"You sound like you don't believe them," Stephen observed wryly.

"I don't. The only people who knew about that meeting place were members of the Shadow class. This Corvin was a member of the Knight class, Order of the Skull," Crouch's lip curled. "A mere rookie couldn't have obtained information like that."

"Where is Corvin now?" Mela questioned.

“Under the protective wing of the Order of the Phoenix,” was the sarcastic reply. “But he didn’t come by that information out of nowhere. Master knew at once that a member of the Shadow class had used Corvin to let the Order of the Phoenix know. After that incident, with the two leaders of the Shadow class gone and the class itself severely compromised, Master banished the rest of the members of the Shadow class to the Knight class.”

“If there is no Shadow class anymore, then what are the three of us doing here?” was Stephen’s annoyed question.

“How simple of you. You are here because the Shadow class is going to be revived. Master wishes it so. But before that happens, the spy within the Shadow class must first be removed. And it is Master’s wish that you... help me... with this undertaking.”

It was obvious Crouch was less than happy with this arrangement. Stephen hid a grin. “Where do we begin?”

“With the only person who could have had contact with the spy, of course. Corvin. Unfortunately, with the breakout in Azkaban and the incident with the Sorcerer’s Stone at Hogwarts, he will be more tightly guarded than usual.”

“All this in one day?” Marric asked dubiously.

“Of course not. Master said that you were to stay with me until the whole matter has been resolved.”

“Joy,” Stephen muttered.

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It was definitely more than a day. A week had passed and all they had done so far was keep tabs on Corvin. The man was staying in a small cottage in the middle of a muggle village and Stephen, Marric, Mela and Crouch took turns keeping an eye on the cottage, on Corvin and the wizards who guarded him. Stephen resented having to take orders from Crouch but there was really very little he could do about it.

He resigned himself to mentally tearing the other Death Eater apart limb from limb, especially whenever he addressed Stephen in that irritatingly condescending tone.

It wasn't until they had just about memorized the number of minutes it took Corvin to brush his teeth that Crouch finally said they were moving in. Stephen thanked Merlin that the long hours of crouching underneath windowsills and keeping as still as possible was over.

They were going in past midnight. Corvin would be in bed already and the two wizards assigned to him (one inside the house, one outside) would be sleepy and sluggish.

Night time found Stephen standing near the house, wrapped in an invisibility spell, and feeling the cold wind sting his cheeks. It was too early for him to have come, but otherwise waiting at the mansion could get on his nerves sometimes. He knew Corvin's routine now. At this time, the man would just have finished his dinner and would be settling in front of the strange muggle contraption called a television. Thirty minutes later, the wizards guarding him would be relieved by two others. An hour after that, Corvin would shut off the television and pick any one of the books he had on his night desk and begin reading. At just about an hour to midnight, he would fall asleep, usually with the book still lying open on his hands.

Stephen stood there, barely moving, as he watched Corvin complete these tasks. An hour and a half after Corvin had finally succumbed to sleep, he heard three popping noises behind him and knew Marric, Mela and Crouch had arrived.

Crouch merely strode past him, shooting him a very dirty look. Stephen smirked before removing the invisibility spell.

"From this point onwards, you follow what I tell you to do," Crouch icily told him.

Stephen merely nodded languidly. The twins exchanged an exasperated look as the four of them crept up to Corvin's cottage. Stephen didn't know what spell Crouch had used but it masked any

sounds that their approach might have made. The darkness of the night did the rest.

Marric took the left side of the house while Mela took the right, both of them whispering out the counter-spells that would disable the various shield and alarm spells placed around the cottage. The wizard lazily sitting outside never knew what hit him after Stephen fired his Killing Curse.

“Sloppy,” was Crouch’s only comment to Stephen.

Stephen nearly snarled. It was a Killing Curse! Did Crouch know of a neat way to do it? Luckily, the twins returned at that instant and quelled some of Stephen’s killing aura. Crouch merely silently turned the knob and entered the door. There was a short yell, a green light, and when Stephen had entered the room, the second wizard was dead on the floor and Crouch was pocketing his wand.

“Even sloppier,” Stephen muttered as he strode past Crouch.

Stephen, Marric and Crouch held back as Mela slipped a potion from inside her robes, tilted the sleeping Corvin’s head and gently made him drink the potion. They waited a few minutes but the only sound so far were snores.

“So how do we find out who the spy is? Do we ask him?” was the sarcastic question.

“Idiot,” Crouch muttered, whipping out his wand and pointing it at Corvin. “Tractus arcus.”

Immediately, the room was surrounded by a thick white fog. Stephen watched, fascinated, as Crouch made a cut on his hand and, using his blood, wrote the date that the ambush happened.

The fog around them dissipated and it was like they were inside a memory, from Corvin’s point of view. Stephen looked around. They were inside a mansion and a group of men were seated around a table, talking heatedly. He saw Crouch among them. Then the doors

were thrown open, and wizards – Aurors, he recognized – ran inside. Then there were spells thrown every which way –

“Tergum,” Crouch muttered.

Immediately the scene changed. This time, it showed Corvin, pale but composed talking to none other than a somber-looking Albus Dumbledore. This didn't seem to content Crouch though who muttered “Tergum” again. The scene around them kept changing and Stephen realized that Crouch was searching for the memory of when Corvin had met up with the Shadow class spy.

After a while, he finally came to it. Corvin was sitting in a café at Diagon Alley, apparently sipping coffee. The tremor in his hands, though, as he set down the cup, betrayed him. The four of them watched the moving scene silently. It was not long before Corvin was joined by another man. At Crouch's immediate curse, Stephen knew what he had not counted on. The man who had met with Corvin had on a glamour spell.

They spoke to each other in a seemingly friendly conversational tone. Corvin though was noticeably clammy and stuttering. The talk did not take long. After a half hour or so, the other Death Eater left, with Corvin still shaking at the table.

Crouch cursed in a low voice and would have tried to search for another memory had the smirk on Stephen's face not stopped him.

“What?” he demanded.

Stephen snickered. “Purebloods are all the same everywhere, aren't they? One thing you can always count on is predictability. That man, your spy, he was wearing a big silver ring with the insignia of a hawk.”

Crouch blinked. Hawk. That was in the crest of only one pureblood family.

Rowle.

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Rowle's screams followed them as they walked out of the room. Thran had left the torture and killing of Rowle in Crouch's hands and though Stephen was loath to leave just yet, he'd had no choice but to follow when Thran gestured for him to do so. Marric and Mela were back with the elementals, seeing as they had missed days' worth of lessons.

To Stephen's surprise, Thran did not lead him back to his bedroom or to any of the other training rooms they usually frequented. Instead, the Dark Lord led Stephen (to the younger boy's delight) to his own study.

Stephen had always loved staying in Thran's study. When he was young and still had nightmares, he would always seek Thran out and more often than not Thran would be in his study. Stephen would spend the remainder of the night there, sleeping among Thran's books, wrapped up in one of the Dark Lord's cloaks.

Unfortunately, due to an incident almost a year ago when Stephen had been practicing with his Darkness in Thran's study and he had (whoopsie) lost control, Thran had expressly forbidden Stephen to go inside without him.

As it was now, Stephen was practically skipping as he positioned himself on the most comfortable armchair, the one directly in front of Thran's antique wooden desk, while the Dark Lord sat behind said desk.

"How was your experience with the classes?" was the first question shot at him.

Stephen knew it was more than just a question. He thought about it for a moment. "It was interesting," he answered honestly. "I've never really thought the Death Eaters were capable of being that organized. And I also found it surprising that they each function within their classes but have no trouble harmonizing it as a whole with the Dark Order."

“Which class interested you most?”

“Hnnn... I’d have to say the Innovator and Espionage classes. That was some pretty cutting edge work Yaxley and Rosier were doing. Almost kind of a really big playground,” Stephen’s voice was enthusiastic. “And Espionage... well, the interrogations were cool. I mean, not just the creativity of the physical torture methods but whoo-hoo, Snape’s psychological mind games was also torture of a different kind. I sort of want to learn how to do mind games like that too.”

Voldemort kept from retorting that Stephen was already too proficient at mind games – he just didn’t realize it yet.

Arranging his features to a studied nonchalance, Voldemort casually asked, “What don’t you like about my Shadows?”

Stephen smiled slowly, baring his teeth. “Not that I don’t like ‘em, Thran. Aside from that little jaunt with Crouch, I’ve just never really seen them in action. And... I just don’t like Crouch. I remember he said something along the lines of you trusting him. Do you really?”

“He is one of my most faithful and devoted followers and his talent and cunning are unmatched,” was the only answer.

Stephen scowled darkly at this. “Do you trust him as much as you trust me?”

Voldemort’s hand didn’t waver from whatever he was writing on the parchment as he replied, “Would it matter if I did?”

There was a loud thump and the Dark Lord looked up to see his protégé had slammed his fist on the wooden table. Stephen had stood up, his body taut and shaking with emotion. His green eyes smoldered, and the color became so dark it was almost black. “It would matter to me, Thran!”

Voldemort merely met the boy's gaze with his own. "Sit down before you lose control of your Darkness and end up destroying my desk. Again."

All the sudden anger seemed to quickly melt away from Stephen as he realized what he was doing. With a sheepish grin, he sat back down again.

"What did Yaxley say about the ankh?" the Dark Lord smoothly asked, changing the topic. Inwardly, he was smirking though. His suspicions were right, after all. The insane brat of a boy was jealous of Crouch, for some unfathomable reason. It took some of Voldemort's self-control to keep himself from laughing at the absurdity of it. It did take Stephen's mind off Crouch though.

"Inconclusive, she said. The legend says that there are three ankhs, right? Well, Yaxley thought that separately, the ankhs don't really do much. There was nothing about that ankh that indicated that it had any special abilities anyway. Yaxley said that it was probably only when all three ankhs were together that their abilities could be discovered," Stephen reported.

"So we would have to search for the other two..." Voldemort muttered.

"Why do you want them, Thran? Is it because of all the legends of immortality surrounding them?" Stephen asked curiously.

"None of your business, brat," Voldemort snapped. He was thinking, though, of what Yaxley had not told Stephen. That the boy was somehow, inexplicably, linked to that ankh. Otherwise, how could he have sensed it was there and found it? Yaxley had also said that she believed the boy was the key to discovering the other two ankhs.

First his Darkness, now the ankhs of life. More and more mysteries were wrapped around the smiling boy before him who was playing now with Nagini than Voldemort cared to know.

Thousands of people, even from places as far-away as Russia and Australia, came to Nicolas Flamel's funeral. As was his request, his body had been buried in a simple grave, his tombstone marked only with his name, date of birth and death in the local cemetery of the Wizarding village where he and Perenelle lived in. Thanks to a couple of nifty, space-widening tricks by Dumbledore, the small space was suddenly big enough to occupy all of the people who had come to pay their respects.

After all, Nicolas' achievements were world-famous. Even without the fame though, living for well over six hundred years, one did tend to accumulate a multitude of friends.

It was a fine day, neither too hot nor too cold. Nicolas' favorite kind of day, Perenelle had tearfully mentioned.

The entire student population of Hogwarts attended the funeral too. Among them was a pale-faced Francis Eveleigh.

Ron and Hermione had been casting occasional worried glances at Francis. After the Sorcerer's Stone incident at Hogwarts, Francis had been unusually unresponsive and distracted. Hermione had even once caught him staring off at the distance at the Owlery. She knew Francis was blaming himself for what happened.

While everybody else was walking past the open coffin to have their last glimpse of Nicolas Flamel, Francis shrugged away from his friends and hesitantly approached Flamel's widow, Perenelle. The woman was talking to Mrs. Weasley and Francis hung back, waiting for them to finish their conversation.

"I have just always thought we would go together, Molly," Francis overheard Perenelle saying. "Not that Nicolas wasn't ready for death. After he gave the Stone over to Dumbledore, we've been setting our affairs in order. I never realized death would come for him so soon."

Francis swallowed the uncomfortable lump in his throat, watched as Mrs. Weasley hugged Mrs. Flamel and offered words of comfort.

When Molly had finally gone, Francis stepped hesitantly forward. Mrs. Flamel looked up at the sound of his footsteps.

“Francis Eveleigh,” Mrs. Flamel murmured. “I’m glad to see you didn’t suffer from serious injuries, dear.”

Francis nodded, his eyes shifting distractedly. Mrs. Flamel patiently waited while the boy seemed to gather up the nerve to speak. When Francis finally looked at her, Perenelle was surprised at the anguish she saw in those eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered, hanging his head again. “I’m really sorry, Mrs. Flamel. It was all my fault.” And to Francis’ surprise and horror, he started crying. He had not cried at all since Mr. Flamel’s death and this time, great sobs shuddered through his body.

“H-he told me to go back but I didn’t listen! They killed him because he was trying to protect me and the Stone. If I had just done what he’d told me to do...” Francis was speaking past gritted teeth and trying to wipe his tears away. “I’m so sorry!”

“Oh. Oh, my dear,” Perenelle was beginning to tear up too. She reached over and hugged Francis close, waiting as the sobs subsided. When Francis finally looked up at her with red-rimmed eyes she smiled sadly.

“None of this was your fault. Nicolas knew what he was doing. I know that he never would have regretted saving your life,” Perenelle gently brushed back the boy’s hair. “Don’t beat yourself up too harshly for it, dear.”

Francis gave her a small, sad, tentative smile and Perenelle smiled back.

“Penny. Francis.”

“Albus,” was Mrs. Flamel’s greeting as the Hogwarts headmaster appeared beside them. Mrs. Flamel and Professor Dumbledore

hugged each other briefly and, understanding Dumbledore's look, Mrs. Flamel excused herself.

Dumbledore led Francis away from the main throng of people. They seemed to be headed for a person sitting on a lone chair by the outskirts of the crowd. When they were near enough to the person, he looked up and Francis was surprised to see the heavily bandaged face of Bill Weasley.

"Bill!"

"Francis," was the reply along with a weak smile.

"Does Ron know you're here? What happened to you?" Francis asked, shocked at the extent of Bill's injuries.

"Mr. Weasley has just returned from Egypt after having had to deal with a Death Eater attack there," Professor Dumbledore answered for Bill as he conjured up two chairs for him and Francis to sit on.

"Death Eater attack?" Francis repeated numbly.

Bill gave a sheepish grin. "I don't really remember much of it. In fact, I don't remember anything about it. I only know that the only ones who survived were me and another man in the Egyptian Ministry named Fraise," Bill's voice was subdued. "Everyone else was killed."

Francis scrunched his eyebrows in confusion. "So they killed everyone else, beat you up but didn't kill you and then... what? Erased your memory? That doesn't make any sense."

"True," Dumbledore sounded amused. "I later hope to try and see if I can remove this memory charm they have placed on Mr. Weasley. Obviously, there was something they did not want him to know. But before that, I would like to speak to you on another matter, Mr. Eveleigh."

Francis felt hesitant. "What matter, Professor?"

Dumbledore looked at him kindly. "Aside from some of our spies in the Dark Order, you're the only other one who's ever seen the Dark Prince. I just wanted to ask you what your impression of him was."

Involuntarily, Francis shivered as his mind returned to that memory. He sometimes still saw it in nightmares. Those eyes.

"I-I didn't really see him all that well," Francis mumbled. "He had a mask on. He didn't even speak while I was there. The only thing was —"

Francis paused for breath. "The only thing I really remember clearly is that he had the coldest, green eyes I've ever seen."

"His eyes caught your attention?"

Francis nodded distractedly. "I don't really know why, Professor. They seemed kind of, familiar, in a way." Another pause, then he let out a soft cry as something occurred to him. "I remember now. Aunt Lily."

"I beg your pardon?" Dumbledore frowned.

"His eyes. If they weren't so cold, they would have been exactly like Aunt Lily's."

TBC

Frankly I don't like this chapter. If there are any typos, forgive them. This was edited by me in haste. Please review.

Coming up: conclusion of rivalry

Yes, I realize it's been over a year please don't kill me. I won't give excuses because really (sigh) there are none. Just... I'm sorry. And enjoy. Or something. Admittedly, this ain't my best work. Forgive any typos, I only read through this once.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. Otherwise, he and Draco would have ended up together and Ginny would be lying in a ditch somewhere.

THE DARK CHRONICLES

Chapter Twenty-One: Rules of Rivalry

Stephen was slumped on a plush armchair that Thran had conjured out of thin air, exhausted after practicing with his Darkness. Thran had just finished telling him that he needed more endurance, since he always tired out quickly whenever he used his Darkness, and endurance could only be built up through even more hours of practice. Stephen suppressed a groan.

"Don't give me that look, boy," Thran stated, frowning when he saw the less-than-happy expression on Stephen's face. "You know how important it is for you to get stronger."

"But I don't understand, Thran. You want me to get stronger using my Darkness but you don't even permit me to use it on missions," there was a decidedly childish and sulky tone to the young boy's voice.

"Using it this early on, without even being fully aware of all its capabilities is foolish," Thran admonished. "The last thing I want is Dumbledore being aware of your powers."

"It's not like he can stop me or anything even if he is aware," Stephen muttered.

Thran pierced him with a glare. "Never underestimate your enemies, boy. Especially not Dumbledore," the Dark Lord turned away and with

a flick of his wand began restoring order to the chaotic room. "You may go now."

Voldemort waited for the sound of Stephen's footsteps or for the cheery, "Okay, Thran, see you after dinner!" but neither came. He turned back only to find the boy standing up and staring at him with a strangely odd expression. Voldemort narrowed his eyes. That expression held curiosity and something else.

"What is it?" With the brat, it was best to be blunt most of the times.

Stephen fidgeted a little, before looking at Thran with both apprehension and defiance. Voldemort was not prepared for the question the boy threw his way.

"Thran, what are Horcruxes?"

The Dark Lord froze and the crystal ball he'd been levitating crashed to the ground, shards flying everywhere. Stephen frowned and when Voldemort still didn't move, the young boy took out his own wand and muttered, "Reparo."

Finally, Voldemort exhaled a deep breath and turned to face Stephen. The boy had expected him to be angry, but he looked curiously resigned. "Where – where did you see that word?"

"It was this really old, really torn-up book in the library," Stephen promptly replied. "I don't think I would've seen it if I hadn't been doing research on that potion you forced on me a few days ago. Anyway, it was just... lying there and I got bored."

Voldemort closed his eyes for a moment. Never underestimate your enemy was a phrase that could describe Stephen aptly as well. "If you read the book, then surely you already know what Horcruxes are."

"But the book only mentioned them in passing. There was nothing there at all about what they were. The only thing I found was a whole bunch of 'pinnacle of the dark arts' crap."

“Language,” Thran hissed. Then he contemplated his answer. The best way to go about it was to be selectively honest with Stephen. If he withheld everything, the boy would always find a way to discover the information he wanted. If he told too much... Voldemort sighed, something he only ever did in the boy’s presence.

“Horcruxes are objects where one can hide pieces of their soul. They are tools used in order to attain immortality.” Voldemort’s voice was low and even Nagini had stopped hissing, eyes focused solely on her master.

“Pieces of their soul? How would that help you gain immortality?” the sudden hunger and curiosity in Stephen’s eyes unsettled Voldemort.

“There is an... act you must commit in order to split pieces of your soul and a spell is done to hide these pieces in any object you so choose. Once that part of your soul is in the object, it becomes a Horcrux.”

“An act?” the boy’s green eyes were gleaming.

Voldemort scowled. “I am not telling you nor are you going to go searching for it. None of that information leaves this room, not even to those twin brats. After this, you will forget all about Horcruxes, am I clear?”

“Crystal, Thran,” Stephen immediately answered, seeing how serious the Dark Lord looked.

Voldemort seemed mollified by his answer because he continued. “Besides, it is not proven whether or not Horcruxes truly give immortality. No written records exist of anyone who has tried such a feat.”

Stephen blinked, mind processing the whole idea of Horcruxes. A slow grin spread on his face. “Say, Thran. If I could discover how to do the whole Horcrux thing, could I make my own?”

The intensity of the Dark Lord's reply almost frightened Stephen. "No! NO!" he quickly strode over to Stephen and gripped the boy's shoulders so tightly Stephen knew they would bruise. The red, snake-like eyes bore into his intently. "You are going to do no such thing! You are not going to contemplate creating Horcruxes, you are not going to go searching on how to make them and you are not even going to think about them after today! Am I understood?!"

Mouth partially open in shock, Stephen mutely nodded. Voldemort then seemed to realize what he was doing because he quickly let go of Stephen's shoulders and stepped well away from the boy. "Go on to your room," he muttered.

"O-okay," Stephen was still slightly shaken by what had happened. He paused just as he was about to turn the knob on the door, though, and he looked back at Thran who was sitting down, seemingly lost in thought.

"Thran, have you ever made Horcruxes?"

The Dark Lord glared at him. "Get back to your room and stop asking irrelevant questions!"

It wasn't until Stephen was in his own room did he turn Thran's answer over in his mind. Thran may have kept things from Stephen, but he never lied to him. The fact that Thran hadn't answered his question meant only one thing – the answer was yes.

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Selwynn rather suspected that his role in this mission was that of babysitter. After all, the mission was simply a one-man assassination. Assigning a three-man team on this mission, even if the target was heavily guarded, seemed like overkill to Selwynn. Then again, it probably had more to do with the other two members in his team rather than the nature of the mission itself.

As Crouch and the Dark Prince glared daggers at each other on either side of him, Selwynn wondered what god he had pissed off for this to happen to him.

Crouch alone would have been enough for this mission. Unfortunately, the Master wanted the Dark Prince to learn about assassinations and had sent him along. Naturally, this turn of events required that a chaperon be present, otherwise the two would end up killing each other. These past few months especially, the rivalry between Stephen and Crouch had escalated to epic proportions.

It didn't help that it seemed to amuse the Dark Lord to place the two in each other's company as much as possible. The unfortunate Death Eaters who happened to find themselves teamed with both Stephen and Crouch invariably took to ordering Anti-Headache Potions from the Innovator Class prior to their missions. Some Death Eaters in the Skulls had even taken to betting on who the Master favored more.

When this mission had been announced and the Dark Lord had ordered the Shadow class to decide who else was going with Crouch and the Dark Prince on the mission, all the other members seemed to have miraculously found excuses to do otherwise. They had volunteered Selwynn (who had been away on a mission at that time) for the unenviable job.

The three of them were dressed in muggle clothes and were loitering around on a crowded muggle street. They were doing a rather good job of blending in, Selwynn thought, as nobody spared a second glance at them. All three of them had on glamour charms. The Dark Prince's especially was more powerful than was normal. When Selwynn had inquired him of this, the boy had merely shot a glance at Crouch's direction and succinctly stated that he wanted to make sure his face (and identity) remained hidden.

Selwynn ran over the plan again in his mind. Their target was Frank Longbottom. The Longbottom couple had long been a very nasty and annoying thorn to the Dark Lord. Frank and Alice Longbottom were arguably the best Auror team that the Ministry and the Order of the Phoenix had ever had. Individually, they were powerful to be sure. But together, they were almost unbeatable. This assassination sought

to cripple the Longbottom duo – one of them needed to be dealt with immediately, the other could follow later.

Being an Auror, it was hard to predict Frank Longbottom's movements. He was protected at the Ministry and even more so at his own home. One of their spies had reported though that once every month, Frank Longbottom would take the muggle routes to St. Mungo's to visit his convalescing father there. Today was one of those monthly visits and it was the most vulnerable time they could hope to target Frank Longbottom.

The Dark Prince frowned, picking at his clothes. "These are uncomfortable," he said aloud. "Why would muggles willingly wear these?"

"Complaining about the clothes? Are you trying to say you cannot play out your role?" Crouch matter-of-factly threw the barb at the younger boy.

The boy bristled. "I am more than capable of carrying out the task I have been assigned," he hissed.

"Do not argue," Selwynn inserted before Crouch could answer. "You might draw attention to us." The Death Eater punctuated his words with a puff of cigar smoke.

He supposed to a certain extent, it was amusing to see Crouch, leader of the Shadows and usually so cold and unruffled, acting up because of a mere child. Or perhaps not just any mere child, Selwynn thought with a covert glance at the Dark Prince. This one was certainly different.

The three of them heard a "meow" and looked down. Crouch reached down and plucked up Clytemnestra, his feline familiar. The cat was the signal.

"He is coming," Crouch murmured after having transported Clytemnestra away. "It is time."

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Frank Longbottom adjusted all the packages he was carrying, mind heavy with disconcerting thoughts. Alice had gotten irritated at him again earlier. She didn't seem to understand why Frank needed to use visiting his father as an excuse for his excursion to muggle shops. It was not safe, not for them. Especially not under the reign of Lord Voldemort. Frank had tried to tell her numerous times that he would be all right. He was one of the top Aurors in the Ministry, for Merlin's sake. You'd think his wife would have a little more faith in him.

Frank was careful. Sometimes bordering on paranoid in fact. Being an Auror and constantly watching out for your back was a heavy burden and he needed time to unburden once in a while.

At this hour, the street was bustling with muggles, all coming home from their respective jobs or from school. This busy atmosphere, completely devoid of the fear and apprehension that gripped the Wizarding World, calmed Frank somewhat. Oh, to be a muggle. To be ignorant and happy and –

He was so deep in his thoughts that he almost missed the boy who bumped into him and then ever so slyly reached into his pockets and pulled out his moneybag. Good thing the normally useless alarm spell that he nonetheless employed kicked in almost immediately and he raised his head, surprised. The boy – thin, unkempt and dressed in mostly rags – grinned coldly at him before taking off on a sprint, weaving amidst the crowd of people.

The pouch contained a hefty amount in galleons as Frank had just withdrawn some money from Gringotts and it also contained some floo powder. Frank knew pickpockets were common in London and he couldn't afford for wizarding artifacts to fall into muggle hands. So in what was possibly the worst decision of his entire life, Frank Longbottom took off to pursue what he thought was an ordinary muggle.

Being an Auror required that he be in excellent physical condition so he was actually able to stay close behind the boy.

“Give that back here, you!” he yelled and people around them turned their heads, curious at the commotion.

Frank’s muggle shoes pounded hard on the pavement as he gave chase to the swift boy. He was concentrating so hard on not losing the kid as he disappeared in and out among other people that he barely noticed he was running towards London’s less than reputable streets and that these streets were not those he was particularly familiar with.

Farther on and there were less and less people, with more rundown buildings, garbage-strewn streets and the occasional mangy, fleabitten dog skulking at a corner. There was a stitch that was starting to hurt at Frank Longbottom’s side and he gritted his teeth at the pain. At least the boy seemed to be tiring like him. It wouldn’t be long now. The boy sharply turned a corner and with a last burst of speed, Frank followed.

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In the rags that he was disguised, clutching Longbottom’s moneybag, Stephen turned the corner and then raced for the narrow alley where Crouch and Selwynn were waiting. He grinned eagerly as he approached it and then he skidded to a stop when he realized that the men waiting there were most definitely not Crouch or Selwynn.

The two men standing there had on pressed suits and the shifty look of people in the midst of a shady deal. They were close to each other and obviously in the middle of heated conversation. It didn’t escape the boy’s notice that both had guns holstered to their sides. They were momentarily surprised at Stephen’s sudden appearance and the boy in turn simply stared at them as the plan ran quickly through his mind. This was the place, he was sure of it. So where were Crouch and Selwynn?

To his side, he heard a shout and saw Longbottom’s running figure making for him. Stephen was about to whip out his own wand and just kill Longbottom himself when two hard thuds made him look at the muggle men again. They were lying face down on the ground,

Crouch and Selwynn standing over them. Stephen narrowed his eyes and stalked over.

“Where were you? He’s coming, get ready!” he hissed but the moment he reached Crouch and Selwynn, a burst of blue light erupted from the wall beside him.

Surprised, Stephen spun around only to discover Longbottom with his wand trained at them.

“Death Eaters!” Longbottom spat out. “I should have known. Well whatever it is you want, you won’t get it! The others should be here in a few minutes.”

Stephen took out his own wand as he threw Longbottom’s moneybag to the ground. “I blame you. This is all your fault!” he muttered to Crouch. “Fortis propugnaculum.”

Bright silver light flared and surrounded the four of them in a circle. Outside the circle, Stephen heard the characteristic popping sounds that said other wizards – Longbottom’s backup undoubtedly – were surrounding them.

Crouch glared at Stephen in turn. “This was not my fault!” he retorted. “We specifically said you had to lure him here after fifteen minutes! Its only been ten!”

Around them, different colored lights began hitting Stephen’s barrier and Longbottom himself was casting another spell. Selwynn countered Longbottom’s curse as Stephen lashed out at Crouch, “This barrier won’t last forever! This is your mission isn’t it? What in Merlin’s name are you waiting for?!”

Crouch hissed a curse under his breath and, taking advantage of Longbottom who was busy with Selwynn, he pointed his wand at the celebrated Auror.

Longbottom only had time to register the familiar words and see the green light heading towards him. His body thudded to the ground a

moment later. Outside the silver circle, the cacophony of lights and spells grew even more.

“So much for inconspicuous,” Selwynn shook his head. “Come, we have to leave. Now.”

The silver barrier dissolved just as the three of them apparated away. The stunned members of the Order of the Phoenix who were left behind could only stare at Frank Longbottom’s lifeless body, lying on the dirt before them.

-

The summer had been hellish, to say the least. Despite his parents’ efforts to take his attention away from the recent events – the Death Eaters’ actions, the mounting death toll, Mr. Flamel’s funeral – echoes of them reverberated throughout the languid summer days that Francis had to bear through. He was almost pathetically glad when summer drew to a close and he didn’t have to put up with his father’s overbright grins and his insistence on ‘practicing’ with some spell or the other so Francis would be ‘ahead’ of his classmates (as if it wasn’t already painfully clear what he was trying to do) or his mother’s gentle but suffocating way of smothering him with affection and protection.

Now, shuffling along the streets of Diagon Alley with Ron and Hermione on either side of him, Francis felt like it was the first breath of fresh air he’d had all summer. It didn’t matter that the people they passed still turned to stare at Francis with either awe or morbid muttering – it was the best he’d felt in a long, long while.

They had just left Hermione’s parents with the Weasleys and the three of them were headed off to the Apothecary to buy more Potions ingredients.

“Another school year again,” Ron groaned. “Another year of seeing Snape’s greasy face looming over our cauldrons...”

“What are you talking about? I find the start of another year exciting! Not that our trip to Spain this summer wasn’t fun – it was very educational – but quite frankly it will be so good to be back at Hogwarts again,” Hermione burred.

“Hrmm... yeah. Anything’s better than being at home right now,” Francis offered. “All dad made me do was ‘learn just a few more spells’ to help me out.” There was a bitter edge of sarcasm in his voice.

“Aw, cheer up, mate. I’ll bet you got to learn some wicked new spells. I had to put up with having Percy in my room, ‘cause Bill’s back. You have no idea how horrid that was,” Ron piped up. “He could go on and on for hours about how he was a prefect again and how I should learn from his example...”

Ron and Francis exchanged snorts of amusement while Hermione huffed. “I think it’s perfectly grand to be a prefect and your brother’s right, Ron. You could learn from his example. Maybe you’d get better grades.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Grades aren’t everything, Hermione and - ”

What promised to be another argument was stopped short Francis when pointed out, “Hey, isn’t that Neville?”

The other two glanced over to where he was looking and saw an old lady speak with Neville for a moment before disappearing into a shop. Neville was left outside alone and obviously ill at ease.

“Oy, Neville!” Ron cried out in greeting, rushing forward to meet his schoolmate. Francis and Hermione hurried after him. When Neville turned to face them, though, the cheery greeting died on Francis’ lips. Neville looked horrible. His face was pale, his skin was splotchy and his eyes were red. His hands were bunched up into fists that gripped tightly at his robes and he stared at them with eerily dead eyes.

“Neville!” Hermione’s voice was shocked. “Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m f-fine, Hermione,” he stumbled over his words in a quiet, clipped tone that sent a shiver down Hermione’s back.

The three were at a loss for words. “Neville,” Hermione tried again, “Has something happened? Are you ill? Perhaps you should see a Healer or drink some medicine. We could - ”

“No!” Neville cried out in a voice that had a group of hags turning to look. “L-look, I’ll b-be fine, okay? Everything w-will be f-f-fine! J-just, leave me alone!”

Hurt, Hermione shrank back. Even Ron was surprised at this anti-social Neville. Francis frowned but tried to move forward. A hand on his shoulder held him back and to his surprise, it was neither Ron nor Hermione.

“Bill?”

“Mum and Dad asked me to come get you three. I guess you don’t know about what happened yet. I only found out yesterday...” Bill told them, quietly shepherding them away from Neville.

Francis felt a chill skitter down his spine. “What do you mean? What did happen?”

The daylight suddenly turned as cold as Bill’s eyes were sad and serious. “It’s Mr. Longbottom, Neville’s dad. He was murdered by Death Eaters. His mother’s beside herself with grief.”

Hermione gasped, Ron swore and Francis felt suddenly woozy. First Flamel, now Mr. Longbottom. A sudden rush of anger at Voldemort and his Death Eaters made him pale and shaking. They had no respect for human lives, none at all. Their Second Year hadn’t even started and already another death. So many people all around him dead... Neville’s father... Oh, dear Merlin. And he was one of the best Aurors. If he could die...

Who else was next?

-

Selwynn was not a coward by any means. Since the Dark Lord had decided to insurrect the Shadow Class, he was one of the first Crouch had approached to re-enter, which said much for his abilities and courage. But like any decent Slytherin, Selwynn knew there was a proper time to fight and a proper time to retreat. This occasion involved the latter.

He had erected one of the strongest barriers he knew around himself and he stood inconspicuously along the corner of the room while he watched Crouch and the Dark Prince throw curses at each other. They had been at it for a whole hour and showed no signs of abating. Worse, the level of dark magic being used was escalating and none of the curses that were bouncing around were any that Selwynn would want inflicted on himself.

As the Dark Prince coolly deflected another curse, he shouted back at Crouch, "Why don't you just admit that it really was all your fault, you aggravating git?"

Crouch gritted his teeth but held his barrier tight as the force of the boy's counter-curse caused the floor to rumble. "Because it wasn't, little brat! You were the one who deviated from the plan and it was just as well Selwynn and I got there in time to correct your mistake!"

"What, I was supposed to run slowly and let Longbottom catch up to me?" Selwynn didn't think it was possible for so much sarcasm to drip off of a person's voice at once.

"You could have timed it better!" Crouch hissed in tandem with casting another curse. "Salazar, even those numbskulls from the Skulls can do this without messing it up! Master made a big mistake when he took you into his keeping!"

The air dropped a few couple of degrees. Selwynn shivered. "What exactly is that supposed to mean Crouch?" the green eyes slitted dangerously. "I'm more than worthy enough for the Dark Order!"

The next curse thrown by the Dark Prince nearly had Crouch sliding to the floor. The entire room was now glittering with ice, made all the more deadly by the stalagmites and stalactites that grew with feverish sharpness. Crouch caught himself though, and steadied himself with remarkable grace.

“No,” he began slowly. “You are not worthy enough to be in the Dark Order. Master might have picked you up anywhere because you had potential but at the end of the day, he will simply grow bored and cast you aside due to your incredible incompetence.”

The Dark Prince sneered. “And you think you’re worthy and competent? You, who spent two years uselessly rotting in Azkaban! Let’s see who the Dark Lord will cast out then. I can tell you now Crouch, it won’t be me.”

“Oh no?” another curse. “To me, and to the Dark Lord, this cause is our whole life. We have given everything for it. You will never understand what it means to give your all. You are a child. This is a game to you. The Dark Lord will not keep you because you will never have what it takes to be able to sacrifice everything for the Dark Order!”

The boy was momentarily immobilized at Crouch’s last few words and the other Death Eater smirked, taking the chance to cast a curse. Before the boy could intercept, another light collided with Crouch’s curse and sparks flashed in the room. Before either could comprehend what was happening, the Dark Lord swept in. His eyes were chilly as they landed on Crouch, the Dark Prince, and then Selwynn.

“Explain.”

-

By the time Thran was done chewing their heads off, Stephen’s mood had gone from bad to murderous. Especially as Thran had sent him to his room with explicit instructions to ‘ruminate about the idiocy you have committed’ or be sent to catalog the library with Gal for the rest

of the week. Even Marric and Mela had carefully avoided him. Aithinne had come to speak to him about certain matters but after seeing Stephen's expression, even the fire elemental had wisely backed off.

Pointing his wand at the antique, porcelain vase tucked into a corner of his room, he blasted the quite possibly priceless furniture to pieces. It calmed some primal urge inside of him a little that was screaming at him to destroy everything in sight. Stephen pointed his wand next at an equally priceless painting depicting a crying angel and that was shredded into a million pieces too. Piece by piece, he slowly demolished his bedroom.

When just about everything was on the floor, in rubbish, he waved his wand and muttered, "Finite reparo." Every piece of furniture he had ruined made itself whole again.

More in control now, he lay himself down on the bed and faced his raging emotions. If he were completely honest with himself, his anger didn't really involve Thran's punishment. Compared to how Thran punished the Death Eaters, Stephen's punishment was lighter than a slap on the wrist. It had more to do with Crouch's comments. Although he disregarded them most of the time, this time it was hard to ignore because some truth was rooted in it. Grimacing, Stephen forced himself to face that truth now.

Truth be told, Crouch had been painfully on the mark. Stephen truly didn't care about the Dark Order or any of its goals. The only reason he was even fighting for it was because of Thran. He didn't really see what the whole point of the blood argument was. And... what Crouch had said. He wasn't capable of sacrificing for the Dark Order... Stephen knew how much this meant to Thran. He was surprised because it hurt that all this would probably never mean as much to him as it did to Thran.

But there was the even more disturbing reality of Thran becoming... bored with him. Stephen's mind flickered back to the first meeting with Thran. It was engraved in his memories. Thran wouldn't leave him. Thran needed his powers. And although the fact that Thran needed him gave him a measure of satisfaction, it also made him feel

hollow inside. Was the only reason why Thran kept him because of his powers? He swallowed the lump in his throat and gave in to a fitful and disturbed sleep.

-

Whispers followed Crouch the next time he walked into the Death Eater gathering. He didn't even have to listen to know what it was about. His rivalry with the Dark Prince had been a favorite topic among the Death Eaters recently. He had even caught Carrows and Danvers betting on which one of them the Master favored more.

Rolling his eyes, Crouch approached Lucius Malfoy, who was unusually enough, standing by himself near the wall.

"Malfoy," Crouch greeted coolly.

The other Death Eater simply jerked his head at him and ignored him. Crouch frowned. Malfoy looked even paler than usual and... was he sweating? Something was wrong. The other Death Eater's composure was usually impeccable. Before he had time to ask questions the Dark Lord entered and everyone bowed.

The meeting proceeded with the usual efficiency the Dark Lord reserved for these events. Each class reported on findings, accomplishments, failures etc. Of course, the information released during these meetings consisted only of that which the Dark Lord decided the other Death Eaters needed to know. The extremely sensitive information was heard only by the ears of qualified Death Eaters or sometimes only by the Dark Lord himself.

This afternoon, the meeting was finished even sooner than usual, a fact that Crouch was grateful for as it allowed him a little relaxation time presumably before the Master sent him on another mission. Unfortunately, as the other Death Eaters were filing out, the Master called for Malfoy to remain and Crouch to wait outside until he was summoned in. Bowing his assent, Crouch chanced a glance at Malfoy and noticed that the other man was almost shaking with fear. Whatever Malfoy had done must have been serious if he feared the Dark Lord's displeasure this much. Malfoy was one of the few Death

Eaters who could accept the Cruciatus for minutes at a time without flinching.

The moment the door closed behind Crouch, Stephen materialized from the shadows where he had been hiding and approached Thran who gestured for Malfoy to come forward.

“Well? Where is the item which I have told you to bring to me?” the Dark Lord’s tone was impatient. “Your letter of a day ago confirmed that you had procured it.”

“I – I have, my Lord.” Malfoy’s stutter had Stephen smirking in delight. “Th-that is to say, I had it but I accidentally... misplaced it.”

The air became heavier. “...Misplaced it?” the Dark Lord’s voice was quiet. “And how in the name of Salazar Slytherin, Malfoy, did you happen to misplace it?”

Malfoy took a deep breath and eventually managed to gather his wits about him and talk without tripping over his words. “I had brought the item with me, my Lord, to present to you this afternoon. Earlier in the morning, though, my family and I were in Diagon Alley to purchase my son’s school things and I had an encounter with Arthur Weasley at Flourish and Blotts. Heated words were exchanged and I, ah,” Malfoy cleared his throat. “Slipped a cursed book into his daughter’s cauldron.”

Malfoy paused, adjusting his robes and swallowing audibly before continuing. “Only the book that I gave the young Weasley chit wasn’t the cursed one but the, ah, item I was supposed to hand over to you, my Lord...”

“Crucio!”

Stephen watched in fascination as Thran held his wand steadily towards Malfoy. The Death Eater actually managed to take in the curse without a single movement but after five minutes had passed, he gasped and collapsed to the floor, screams echoing through the vaulted ceiling. The torture continued for the better part of an hour

and a half and the Dark Lord was creative enough that it didn't stop at the Cruciatus Curse – Voldemort employed a good number of dark curses, all of which were of course known to Stephen himself.

Even though the Dark Prince was never a huge fan of torture, the way Thran did it had a certain grace and elegance that he couldn't help but watch both the Dark Lord and the person being tortured. It was almost as if Thran could orchestrate the length and pitches of the screams. It sounded even better than the poetry that Stephen liked to read aloud to himself. By the time Voldemort felt like he had done enough, Malfoy was a shivering wreck on the floor, biting his lips so hard to keep from groaning in pain and drawing blood from said lips in the process.

“Go, Malfoy before I indulge the urge to hurt you more. I will decide on a suitable punishment for you later. In the meantime, someone must be sent to rectify the error you have so foolishly made,” the Dark Lord's voice was low and full of fury.

Still trembling, Malfoy nodded and shakily pulled himself up, almost collapsing to the floor again due to the intense pain that still wracked his body. He hurried out of the room as fast as his unsteady gait would allow and so did not notice when a small piece of paper fluttered out of his robes and fell to the floor. Voldemort, deep in thought, did not notice it either so Stephen walked over and plucked it from the floor.

It was a photograph, he saw with surprise. The young boy in it looked almost about his age and was the spitting image of Lucius Malfoy. The boy was perched primly on a throne-like chair, expensive blue robes arranged artfully around him and looking towards the photographer with a haughty expression on his face and the faint wisp of a smirk by the corner of his lips. The one glaring difference to Lucius Malfoy though, was the eyes. They were bright with laughter and not dull like Lucius'. Stephen blinked and turned the photo over. It simply said Draco, 12th birthday. This was Malfoy's spawn then.

“ Boy,” Thran's voice called out impatiently. Without thinking, Stephen slipped the photo in his own robes and turned to face the

Dark Lord. "Crouch is outside. Get him. There is something I need to talk to the both of you about."

Stephen felt a sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach. Part of him already knew what Thran was planning before he even said a word. His mouth was drawn into a thin line as he crossed the huge room and pulled open the door. Crouch was outside, leaning on the wall looking bored.

"You are wanted inside," Stephen said shortly.

Looking as though he hadn't heard Stephen, Crouch walked past him and into the room where he immediately bowed low to the Dark Lord.

"You wanted to see me, Master?"

Stephen scowled as he took his place beside Thran. Voldemort nodded then fixed his piercing gaze first on Crouch then on Stephen. "I have a mission. For the two of you," he spoke slowly, letting the words sink in.

Much as Stephen wanted to scream and cry and smash something into little bits again, he simply stood there and did not say anything. The last thing he wanted to do was lose his composure in front of Crouch and end up angering Thran. He merely inclined his head while Crouch murmured, "Of course, Master."

"The daughter of those muggle-loving Weasleys," his lip curled in derision. "Has something of mine that I want back. It is the diary of Tom Riddle." Thran didn't even pause to explain who Tom Riddle was, as if he expected Stephen and Crouch to know. Something twinged in Stephen's mind at the name 'Tom Riddle'. He had heard it before... but where? "It looks ordinary save for that fact that it is a valuable magical object that I need to have back within my possession."

His eyes examined the two of them intensely. "I am well aware that your extreme... dislike of one another has caused more than its share of problems. As it is, this mission will also serve as a chance for you to settle any differences you may have. And you had better take it

because it is the first and last chance you will get from me. Any more disagreements after this mission and I will be forced to take drastic measures.” Stephen felt Thran’s eyes boring on him especially at the last part and he tried not to think about his Nebula bursting into flames.

The two of them murmured what passed for assent and the Dark Lord continued. “The both of you will go to Hogwarts. This matter is pressing but not very much so, and you will have one month to retrieve the diary, which is more than enough time. The most important part of this mission is you must not let anybody, especially anyone from the Order of the Phoenix, know that I am after this diary. This is crucial. Working directly under the nose of Albus Dumbledore is not going to be an easy feat, either. But the two of you will work it out.” There was a slightly cruel curl to Voldemort’s lips at that statement.

And what else could Stephen do but assent some more?

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“You couldn’t at least have picked a place with a roof?” Stephen said scathingly.

Thran had made the two of them leave that very night. Traveling to Hogwarts had not been difficult, all it took was a heap of Concealment and Undetectable Charms plus two broomsticks. The long trip though was tiring and coupled with the fact that it rained all throughout made Stephen’s sour mood even sourer.

He and Crouch were standing at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, pelted by rain drops that had somehow managed to seep through the waterproof cloak and into Stephen’s clothes, and staring at the wonderfully dry and warm students of Hogwarts enjoying a fine dinner within the Great Hall. Stephen’s stomach grumbled.

“We will not enter the castle until we have discussed a plan of action,” was Crouch’s dismissive reply. “Doing that will be an

unnecessary risk. Hogwarts is Dumbledore's bastion and he has eyes and ears everywhere."

A thin, palpable silence hung in the air. Stephen fidgeted, trying not to shiver and fighting the urge to cast a warming charm lest Crouch think he was a coddled, pampered brat. "Well I hope your grand plan doesn't include standing here all night," he muttered.

Crouch said nothing but simply turned around and began heading for the hut they had passed by earlier. Stephen hurried after him. The older Death Eater pushed open the door and they were greeted by the ferocious bark of an enormous boarhound. Stephen's wand was immediately in his hand but Crouch had already cast a spell on the creature and it simply slumped to the ground, fast asleep.

Stephen followed Crouch's example, removing his cloak and draping it on one of the chairs near the fire. The crackling fire warmed him as he gathered his wits and turned to face Crouch, mind already running through all the possible ways they could slip undetected into Hogwarts and get the diary of Tom Riddle.

"Ginevra Weasley," Crouch began in a bored voice, reciting the information that Snape had handed them earlier. "Youngest child and only daughter of Arthur and Molly Weasley, he works in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office and they both belong to the Order. Not particularly powerful, intelligent, wealthy or cunning. The girl is equally unremarkable. A chatty, redheaded chit. Well we don't have anything to worry about from that corner at least... Being a Weasley, she is of course a Gryffindor," Crouch sneered at the word. "And chances are the diary will be in the Gryffindor dormitory."

"We hardly need a month to complete this mission," Stephen scoffed. "We could just use the Imperius on the Weasley girl – or any unsuspecting Gryffindor idiot for that matter – and order them into the Gryffindor dorms to search for the diary."

Crouch stared at him. "Have you lost all common sense? Using the Imperius on a Gryffindor?? Why don't we just send a Howler to Dumbledore informing him of our plans?!" the sarcasm in Crouch's

tone was venomous. "Gryffindors have no concept of privacy whatsoever! One of their own acting oddly would draw attention faster than that Howler I mentioned. And the Imperius is not infallible, as you yourself have proven," Crouch added sourly. "How are we to know that any student we curse is not able to throw it off?"

"And I suppose you have a better plan?" Stephen sneered.

"Much better than yours," Crouch barked back. Stephen thought he heard an 'idiot' added for good measure at the end of that sentence and felt his blood begin to boil. He quickly clamped a lid on his temper. He had never really had a temper before so it's frequent presence in his life nowadays (especially around Crouch, Sweet Salazar) was trying enough for a boy of twelve, not to mention one who had the power to kill most anybody he wanted. Thran should be pleased with my self-control, he thought murderously.

"Pray tell enlighten me as to this amazing plan then," the Dark Prince sarcastically replied, edging towards the fire, hands itching to hold his wand.

"I have found that in matters that the Master wishes to be kept quiet, it is best to employ the simplest methods available," Crouch drawled out without really saying anything, obviously enjoying having gained the upper hand. Stephen merely kept his mouth shut, and turned to observe the fire. Long moments of tense silence passed with Crouch staring calculatngly at Stephen waiting for him to inquire and with Stephen staring blandly back, telling Crouch with his eyes that hell would freeze over before he condescended to ask Crouch anything.

A glimmer of what almost appeared to be respect flashed in Crouch's eyes before he drew a flask tied by his hip and set it on the table. No longer able to fight off curiosity, Stephen reached over and unstopped it. The bubbling, mud-colored, viscous liquid inside had the Dark Prince raising a brow before his eyes widened as he grasped Crouch's plan. His mouth opened and closed a few times while his expression grew stormy, words battling it out to see which would come out first. But Stephen gritted his teeth, drew a deep breath, and fixed Crouch with a glare hot enough to rival dragon fire.

“You cannot be serious.”

“I am perfectly serious, young Master.” There was that mocking tone again. “Of course we will have to choose our targets carefully. Students, obviously, and not teachers. Not Slytherins – they and the Gryffindors hate each other and it would cause too many questions if a Slytherin was found in Gryffindor Tower. Definitely not a Gryffindor because they would notice if one of their own was acting oddly. So a Ravenclaw or a Hufflepuff. We will have to observe which Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff best to use though. Perhaps a week to pick out the perfect targets...”

Stephen focused his glare on the flask containing the Polyjuice Potion. He didn't want to have to admit it but Crouch's plan did have merits. “And what would the Gryffindors think if they found a Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff raiding their dormitory?”

Crouch gave a dismissive gesture of his hand. “We simply explain it away as a dare or other such foolishness that students usually indulge in.”

Stephen blinked at this. Students usually indulged in foolishness? Crouch had begun talking again. “We will also have to watch the little girl to ensure that the diary is not with her when we plan to steal it. Yes. A little over a week. Maybe two. It shouldn't take much longer than that.”

“A week or two,” Stephen hollowly repeated. With Crouch. Oh Sweet Salazar. Stephen forced himself to think of Thran. And his Nebula. Happy thoughts.

“Don't think I'm too happy with spending all that time in your company as well,” Crouch said shortly, peering out of the window of the hut towards the castle. “I see dinner is coming to an end... Come, we have to go. We can sort out the details somewhere else.”

As they stepped out of the hut, Crouch revived the boarhound. It wasn't raining anymore and on the cool night air, the sounds of

chatting, laughing students drifted to their ears. Stephen frowned, wondering how one could live in such noise all the time. He followed as Crouch led the way across the Hogwarts grounds.

One week later...

Stephen was shaking from anger. His control was slipping away by the spade and he knew that if he remained in Crouch's company for another ten minutes he was going to unleash his Darkness on Crouch. Which wouldn't be all that great a loss, really. He'd never tried his Darkness on another human being. Thran would no doubt be... upset, though. Stephen glared at Crouch, so hard that it was all the Death Eater could do to hide the sudden nervousness that skittered up his spine at the Dark Prince's intense look. If it wasn't for the mission, Crouch had no qualms about the fact that he would be dead right now.

Stephen took a deep breath. "I have to be a girl!?" his voice echoed.

They were in one of the empty, unknown storerooms that seemed to litter the castle. It had been difficult enough getting into Hogwarts undetected but then Crouch had set up a slew of spells and shields around the room to ensure that they wouldn't be seen and with the way he had done it, you'd have thought they were in the middle of war and he was fortifying a garrison or something. They'd spent most of the week picking out their targets and memorizing the schedules not only of Ginny Weasley but of most of Gryffindor Tower. Now they were finally ready to mobilize but before that, there were still a few minor details to iron out.

"Why do I have to be a girl?!" Stephen was almost spitting.

Crouch kept his voice even. "One of us has to Polyjuice into that Ravenclaw boy that the Weasley girl has a crush on in order to distract her. The other has to change into a Hufflepuff girl because the diary is in the girls dormitories. You can't possibly be the boy because you are woefully deficient in experience with... teenage interactions. You must be the one to get the diary."

The horrified expression on the Dark Prince's face almost made Crouch laugh if he still wasn't slightly nervous of the boy's anger. Crouch continued coolly, "Of course if you are not up to the task, you could always return and send a replacement. I am sure there are numerous Death Eaters who would give their right hands in order to serve the Master this way because they really care about our cause and – "

"All right, you can shut up. I'm doing it," Stephen muttered.

"I am glad," Crouch said softly. "It would be a pity if the Master got rid of you simply because of your refusal to accomplish a mission."

The boy's eyes glinted dangerously. "The Dark Lord would never get rid of me. I am invaluable to him... as he is to me. He has promised to always take care of me."

The laugh that that statement elicited from Crouch was mocking. "What do you fancy the master as? Your father?"

This time he really did lose control. The rotting bookshelves behind them exploded in a swirl of wood and sawdust. Stephen's eyes were so dark they were almost black and his hands were clenched and shaking. His voice, quiet, deadly, simply said, "Don't you dare say that again. Calling him my father is worse than an insult. My real father," the word was spat out disgustedly. "Took pleasure in allowing me to be tortured. The worst the Dark Lord has ever done to me is stick me in your company."

For a moment, there was silence. Stephen beating himself internally for even saying such a personal statement around Crouch and the Death Eater not believing what he had just heard the Dark Prince say.

Stephen grabbed one of the two vials of Polyjuice on the table and faced Crouch, expressionless. "Well? I thought we were going to do this. We are running out of time. The little girl will be out of the library and walking back to the Tower in a while."

Crouch nodded, then handed Stephen the lock of light brown hair that belonged to Hufflepuff Eleanor Branstone while he added the dark hair of Ravenclaw Michael Corner. Said two students had already been knocked out by Stunning Spells and sequestered away in a magical trunk that Crouch had brought for just that purpose. Stephen watched as their potions changed colors and he glanced at Crouch, who nodded, before bringing the vial to his lips and swallowing the entire potion.

The effects were instantaneous. His stomach hurt, overtaken by severe cramps and he held on to the table to keep from doubling over. The fingernails of his other hand bit into flesh but Stephen held himself stoically. Dimly, he heard Crouch groan but was too focused on his own pain. It ebbed away as quickly as it had come and when he opened his eyes, he found himself shorter and more slender with hair that hung in a braid below his back. Stephen frowned and removed the mask from his face that didn't fit very well now. Looking up, he found Crouch as a dark-haired boy, slightly taller than him in loose, baggy clothes.

The other Death Eater handed him the clothes and robes they had stolen earlier from the laundry the house-elves had done before he turned away and started pulling off his own clothes. Stephen turned his back on Crouch, too, aware of how self-conscious he felt. He had never undressed in front of anyone in his life, not even the house-elves. And Crouch technically had his back to him but... He repressed a sigh. He didn't want the arrogant one to start making comments about his dedication to the mission or the Dark Order again. He simply started pulling off his own clothes as swiftly as he could.

The girl clothes were confusing. He covered himself up with a cloak before turning to Crouch who was pulling his trousers on. Stephen cleared his throat. When Crouch turned he held up the... item to him with a questioning look.

“Brassiere,” Crouch said smoothly. “It goes on the breasts. You fasten it around the back.”

Damn this girl's body for easily blushing. Stephen nodded and turned back again, redder than before. It took a few tries before he managed to clasp it on. Crouch was already done with his own clothes and was impatiently tapping on the table waiting for Stephen to finish. When he was finally done with the shoes, the short, brown-haired Hufflepuff with a still-red face, turned to the expressionless dark-haired Ravenclaw who nodded.

"I'll go find and distract Weasley. You go to the Gryffindor Tower. You already know the password. Just tell that fat old woman in the portrait that you really need to talk to your best friend or something. I'm sure even you can come up with a convincing story. Besides, you're in Hufflepuff. She won't question your integrity," Crouch finished with a smirk.

An empty wall in one of the forgotten corridors of Hogwarts Castle quietly slid open and a scowling, embarrassed Eleanor Branstone accompanied by a stoic Michael Corner stepped out. They nodded to each other and went in separate directions.

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"Ginny Weasley, right?"

The voice behind her as she walked out of the library took her by surprise and Ginny nearly dropped the books she was carrying.

"Need some help with that?"

Before she could reply he had already sauntered forward and taken most of the books from her grasp. Ginny couldn't help but blush as his hands brushed hers. "Th-thanks," she stammered. "Y-you're, um, Michael Corner, right? Ravenclaw?"

Inwardly, she cursed herself. Ginny had liked this boy since the start of the school year when she'd first seen him on the Hogwarts Express. He was really cute and she'd mourned a little on the inside when she had been sorted into Gryffindor and she found out he was in Ravenclaw. Now he was here, and most of the castle was in

Hogsmeade, and Ron and Francis were out in the Quidditch Pitch. How did he even know her name?

“Er, yeah,” he laughed a little. “C’mon, let me help you with these. Where were you headed?”

“J-just Gryffindor Tower,” she was stuttering, what was the matter with her?! “You don’t have to, you know. I can handle it just fine myself.”

He winked at her. He actually winked at her! Ginny felt herself blushing to the roots of her hair. Wow. Since when had Michael Corner gotten so... suave?

“What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn’t stop to help a damsel in distress? Gryffindor Tower isn’t that far anyway. Let me walk you there. I kind of wanted to, ah, talk to you anyway,” he said shyly, ducking his head.

Ginny felt her heart leap to her chest and she couldn’t stop smiling and blushing. She didn’t even realize that Michael Corner was taking the long way towards Gryffindor Tower.

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Stephen slipped into the First Year girls’ dormitory in Gryffindor Tower, thankful that no one had stopped him. Two Gryffindor Second Years had exited the portrait as soon as he got to the landing of Gryffindor Tower so he had waited a while before attempting to enter. A well-spun story involving ‘her’ sister, an essay and a book she really needed for an exam because Professor Snape was being a bully got him into the Tower. The fat old lady at the portrait was a sucker for crying girls.

No one was in the common room, probably because all the Higher Years were out in Hogsmeade. He and Crouch had agreed that today was perfect for taking the diary since most of the student population in Hogwarts wasn’t in the castle. He had around twenty to thirty minutes to get the diary and then he would slip out of Gryffindor

Tower and meet up with Crouch in the empty storeroom. They would oblivate the real Eleanor Branstone and Michael Corner and then wait for the cover of darkness and the Polyjuice Potion's effect to fade before they left.

The Dark Prince wrinkled his nose as he stepped into the room with four four-poster beds. The room smelled of an annoying flowery girly scent that made him a bit nauseous. Ginny Weasley's belongings were the ones nearest the window so he made a beeline for there. Stephen didn't even have to look very hard for the diary. The Weasley chit had left it in her schoolbag and Stephen deftly took it out.

It was a thin, black book, entirely unremarkable. The date, written in front of the diary, indicated it had been bought fifty years ago. Stephen frowned then opened it. Aside from the name TM Riddle written on the first page, there was nothing in it. He flipped through it just to make sure. He would have thought that the Weasley girl would have written something in it if it was empty. What did Thran want with an empty book anyway?

Stephen had already placed it in his cloak and was about to leave when a memory from out of nowhere slammed into his mind and he stopped wide-eyed in his tracks. He remembered his three-year-old self, looking up at Thran and the Dark Lord scowling down at him.

"Is that really the name your parents gave you?... It's kinda hard to say... but what's your real, real name?"

"My given name, boy, was Tom Marvolo Riddle."

This was Thran's diary. But Thran hadn't written anything in it... perhaps it was in invisible ink? Whatever was probably recorded here, Thran wanted this diary back for a reason. Stephen felt heat in his pocket and took out a small white stone Crouch had given him earlier. The Death Eater told him that the stone would become hot if he and the Weasley girl were nearing Gryffindor Tower and it was a signal that Stephen should get out now.

Not wanting this to end the same way the Longbottom mission did, the Dark Prince stowed the stone away with the diary and quickly and quietly exited Gryffindor Tower the same way he had come in. No one could have known he was there at all.

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“Congratulations,” the Dark Lord’s low voice told them, ten hours later when they returned to the headquarters. He sounded amused. “The mission was completed without any... major disagreements. Crouch, you may retire. Return the day after tomorrow for a briefing regarding the Shadow Class.”

Barty Crouch, Jr. bowed, knowing a dismissal when he heard one. He was exhausted, partly from the mission, mostly from being in the company of the Brat Prince for a prolonged period of time. As he stepped out of the audience chamber, though, he couldn’t help but glance back at the Dark Prince who had approached the Master and was quietly conversing with him.

What the boy had said earlier was still reverberating in his mind. Granted Crouch’s comment had been poisonous but his reply had been positively vicious, as if it had hit on a personal level somehow. The Death Eater felt a stab of envy at seeing Stephen’s close position to the Dark Lord. Because no matter how many barbs he might throw the boy’s way, the real truth was that the boy’s relationship to the Dark Lord was something Crouch could not even hope to come close to.

He shut the door behind him and something akin to resignation washed over him along with the exhaustion.

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Stephen stumbled over his robes and Thran caught him, impatiently righting him. Stephen gave the Dark Lord a winning smile before another head-cracking yawn threatened to overcome him. Sleeping in a dusty, empty storeroom for over a week hadn’t really given him much rest.

They stopped in front of Stephen's bedroom. "Be ready tomorrow morning at ten. You are training with me," the Dark Lord ordered shortly.

Stephen nodded, happy at the opportunity to train with Thran again. The Dark Lord studied him before bidding, "Very well, then. Sleep. You look like you need it." Voldemort turned away but not before Stephen caught... Was that an almost-smile on Thran's face? The almost-smiles happened very rarely but Stephen felt elated whenever they did. Especially at the knowledge that he could also make Thran happy.

The Dark Lord had taken no more than a few steps away when he felt arms around him that, as quickly as they had come, then withdrew. He stood still. Had the boy just hugged him? But when he whirled around, Stephen was already retreating into his room, the mischievous smile telling Thran yes, that hug had happened.

Before shutting the door, though, Stephen's voice floated out, "Hey, Thran? You might want to take better care of your diary next time so I don't have to go around turning into a girl just to get it back, 'specially since it's such an important part of you."

The Dark Lord's grip on the diary tightened as Stephen's words sunk in. He couldn't breathe for a moment. Did the brat know?

TBC (because I'm evil that way)

Coming up: the real conclusion of rivalry. The conclusion of rivalry thing should have happened in this chapter but I realized there was a lot of ground and one more mission left to cover and it would've made this chapter waaaay too long so I decided to split it.

This chapter was more along the lines of Stephen character development. Angst accompanies puberty. Please review. Mfufufufu, to Stephen hugging Thran.

CHP23